SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

Academic Development Institute

School Community Journal

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School Community Journal publishes a mix of: (1) research (original, review, and interpretation), (2) essay and discussion, (3) reports from the field, including descriptions of programs, and (4) book reviews. The journal seeks manuscripts from scholars, administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, and others interested in the school as a community.

Editorial Policy and Procedure

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Editor's Comments

This issue is chock full of great articles with the potential to positively affect practices in several areas. We begin with McKenna and Millen, who give us a new model of ideal parent engagement that grew out of a qualitative study of diverse, engaged mothers, most with low incomes. We then have a trio of articles based on Latino families in the U.S. school system. Durand and Perez explore differences and similarities of diverse Latino families in their educational beliefs and involvement. Monzó contrasts episodes of symbolic violence against Latina mothers, including at least one highly educated mother, with an episode of caring. Jasis shares the story of a group of Spanish-speaking, immigrant, Latino parents who worked collectively to first confront and then partner with school officials in order to help their children gain access to more challenging classes to put them on track for school success. Each of these articles adds something new to our understanding and can improve school practices.

Manz, Lehtinen, and Bracaliello highlight important practical considerations for effective goal setting for those conducting home visit programs in early childhood. Murray, Handyside, Straka, and Arton-Titus describe a unique and powerful collaboration of preservice special education teacher candidates and parents of children with disabilities, made possible by community partnerships. Next, Carr offers a literature review that illuminates effective homework practices for teachers in inclusive classrooms that should benefit all their students.

Leonard and Bernhardt each provide an article about their respective programs promoting college readiness and access for students who might not achieve these goals without a little extra support, with practical implications for all secondary schools and their students' families. Goldkind and Farmer describe their study showing that a positive school climate and parent engagement may help mitigate some of the negative factors associated with larger school size. Finally, Klingbeil reviews the book *Innovative Voices in Education: Engaging Diverse Communities*, recommending it as a worthwhile read. It is our hope that these articles will inform school practices and inspire further research in each of these crucial areas in order to create thriving school communities.

Lori Thomas
May 2013

Look! Listen! Learn! Parent Narratives and Grounded Theory Models of Parent Voice, Presence, and Engagement in K–12 Education

Maria K. McKenna and Jessica Millen

Abstract

Educators' expectations and understandings of parental involvement in our nation's schools are often disconnected from the reality of students' home lives. This qualitative study purports that educators often lose opportunities to more fully understand and serve students, particularly when perceptions of parental involvement and home–school–community relationships are not accurate or expansive enough to appreciate the nuances of different cultural, economic, or geographic circumstances. Parent (or caregiver) engagement, as we define it, encapsulates both parent voice and parent presence. Parent voice implies not only that parents have ideas and opinions about their children, but also that educators are receptive to this voice, allowing for an open, multidirectional flow of communication. Similarly, parent presence refers to actions related to the voices of caregivers. Based on a grounded theory model of qualitative research, we used a small, theoretically derived sample of parents involved with a local parent education program to further understand parent engagement, presenting detailed descriptions of conversations and writing done by participants through focus groups and interviews. From these data, new models of parent voice and presence emerged. These models act as precursors to a reconfigured and more comprehensive model of parent engagement. Crucial to the final model is an understanding of parent participation in children's lives that is fluid, robust, and specific to context and culture. The final model presented herein is a combination of parent voice and parent presence, whereby children's well being is central to the interactions.

Key Words: parental involvement, model, engagement, voice, presence, cultural, grounded theory, qualitative, school partnerships, mothers, family

Introduction

"Because this is my thing—I know my child better than anybody else in this school...."

—Trina, mother and advocate[1]

"Don't assume that low income means low intelligence or low caring. I raise my children to the best of my ability...."

—Latisha, mother and advocate

Individuals naturally rely upon preexisting assumptions and predictions in order to glean meaning from the world around them, and educators are no exception to this rule. Educational environments, however, are inextricably linked to the diverse and rapidly changing demographics of the children and families they serve. Holding untested assumptions about children and families is a harmful place to begin when attempting to work out issues related to teaching, learning, and parent involvement. Educators' perceptions of parental involvement are, more often than not, situated in good faith and stem from well-meaning intentions but can misconstrue what many parents' expectations, participation, love, and care for their children look and feel like on a daily basis. Erroneous assumptions can be doubly harmful when put in the context of working with low-income and/or minority parents since, in many cases, these children have fewer opportunities to prove these assumptions wrong. Understandings of parent involvement must involve an expansive appreciation of the nuances of different cultural, economic, and geographic circumstances in order for schools to flourish (Delpit, 2006; Fine, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hong, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valdez, 1996; Yosso, 2005). If we listen closely to parents—their wishes and dreams, fears and concerns—we find that there are lessons and suggestions that emanate from a deep sense of caring. Educators must be able to view such listening opportunities as an asset in order to be the best educators possible.

Popular models of parent (read also caregiver) involvement and the emergence of national and regional parent involvement coalitions brought parent engagement to the forefront of educational discourse over the last three decades (e.g., organizations such as Parents as Teachers, the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, the National Network of Partnership Schools, the School Community Network, and the Harvard Family Research Project).

In particular, the work of Joyce Epstein (see especially Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2009, 2011) moved the discussion about parent engagement into mainstream educational discourse across the United States. Supporting this trend, the first wave of modern research from the late 1980s on into the turn of the century regarding parent/caregiver involvement focused primarily on the efficacy and value of parent engagement as measured by student achievement along with the actions parents must take to be "involved" with their children's educations but fell short of fully explicating the cultural and social dimensions at play in parent and caregiver engagement efforts (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003; Keith et al., 1993; Steinberg, 1996). More recently, parent engagement literature is beginning to address the value of cultural, social, and economic facets of parent engagement (Auerbach, 2009, 2011, 2012; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes 2011a; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Still, many current home–school engagement practices seem predicated on the notion that parents do not naturally operate in ways that are caring and involved for their children. Common assumptions held by administrators and teachers, and often propagated in teacher education programs, are that educators must "teach" parents how to be involved and "train" them in ways of caring for children (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Ramirez, 2004). This is not only insensitive to the realities of different parenting styles and family constructs but is ultimately a nonproductive approach to the construction of successful models of engagement. In addition, many current research paradigms and engagement models suppose parents are actors whose role in schools, whenever a role exists, is to support the teacher and/or school, as opposed to participating in an integrated partnership with the goal of helping children develop their full potential.

We posit that the role of the parent and the relationships between parents and schools must be reconsidered. Parent engagement must include two central components: parent voice and parent presence. This work serves as a direct response to Jeynes's (2011a) call to revisit outdated and insufficient notions of parent involvement and is supported by Auerbach's (2009) recent research on family engagement from the perspective of school administrators. It is also buoyed by Yosso's (2005) well-reasoned examination of dominant forms of cultural capital. Jeynes's charge led us to explore the possibility of a new model of parent engagement that includes parent voice *and* parent presence, components seldom seen as part of a larger whole. Support for these new components is found in this small but in-depth examination of the perspectives of eight parents' understandings of parent engagement, bound in a grounded theory model of qualitative research. Ultimately, this work leads us to a hypothetical model of parent engagement that we argue should act as the basis for future

research. Crucial to this hypothetical model is the notion that parent voice and parent presence are equal and central tenets of parent engagement. Understanding parent participation in children's lives as a fluid and culturally sensitive combination of parent voice and parent presence, in both the home and school contexts, could foster a much needed, modern, and comprehensive model of parent engagement that all educational stakeholders might use and which should prove especially helpful to classroom teachers. Within this new framework, the discursive semantics of parent involvement are particularly important. Thus, in addition to the presentation of models of parent voice, parent presence, and engagement, we seek to clarify the meanings and expectations that accompany much of the writing and thinking on parent involvement.

Parent Voice and Parent Presence Defined

Parent voice and parent presence require clear definitions in order for the data herein to be optimally analyzed and understood. Defining these key terms helps to ensure that this work results in clear and useful information across applications. These definitions emerged during the methodological design process and were confirmed as data were analyzed. The definitions, while echoing sentiments from other parent involvement researchers are, in the end, unique to this project (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a).

Parent voice, as we define it, is the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their thinking and understandings about their children's and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school. Ideally, these understandings have weight within educational settings and ultimately have a positive influence on the educational experiences of children. Parent voice may consist of parents' desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their children, information traditionally lacking acknowledgement in educational circles. Parent voice may also come in the form of frustration, concern, or anger over isolation, exclusion, or disrespect within the educational process.

Parent presence refers to a parent or caregiver's actions and involvement in their children's education, whether through formal school spaces and traditional activities or "in more personal, informal spaces, including spaces created by parents themselves"(Carreón et al., 2005, p. 466.) Traditional activities include helping with homework, attending school-sponsored events, being a member of the PTA, or responding to notes or queries from the school. Unconventional, more personal spaces of involvement in school might include finding ways to engage the educational world despite language barriers, cooking food or working behind the scenes at a school event, being a consistent weekly presence in a classroom, or negotiating safe living and transportation options related to schooling (Carreón et al., 2005). Moreover, moving beyond

the classroom and school contexts, parent presence includes all facets of caregiver involvement that supports and allows a child's educational success. It is through parent presence that acts of care are observed, noticed, and integrated into the educational experience of each child. The goal of parent presence is to build the social and cultural capital of children, both inside and outside of formal educational environments. Parent voice and parent presence are related and, at times, overlapping components of parent engagement. Neither of the two, however, seem to be fully understood by educators and therefore merit additional examination.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is built upon a triad of beliefs. First, the philosophy of educational care (Noddings, 1984) forms the foundation of our framework. Similarly, sociocultural theory (Lareau, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) and critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) inform our work from the vantage point of the design, implementation, and implications of the research for practitioners. Noddings's philosophy of educational care dictates that educators must be willing to have an ongoing, receptive, reciprocal, and motivated relationship with their students and, by extension, their families. This relationship occurs through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation of appropriate actions and behaviors supported by all parties involved (Noddings, 1984). Vygotsky and Bell remind us that we must consider the social and cultural contexts of all children's lives in order to develop a fully informed understanding of an individual. Moreover, critical race theory, as it applies to education, implores researchers and practitioners to consider race as a salient feature of our society and to acknowledge the power differential that embedded racism and wealth differentials in our nation create for children and schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Educational care, sociocultural theory, and critical race theory are not, themselves, means to an end in the context of parent engagement, but represent a proactive attempt to diminish cultural insensitivity, prevent parent and child isolation within the educational realm, and advocate for a more open and inclusive model of parent engagement in the educational process.

Historical Framework

Parent engagement fosters the notion that the cultural and social nuances of families are a source of strength as opposed to an oppositional force in the education of children. Central to the philosophy of parent engagement is the understanding of parents as a child's first and best teacher. Our work here builds on a wide range of scholars, notably, the work of Moll and his colleagues

on the understanding of funds of knowledge, especially cultural knowledge vis-à-vis families (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). As far back as the Enlightenment, philosophers frequently stressed the family as central to the development and learning of children, and many modern educational philosophers have followed suit. Understanding the relationship of family and home to school, however, is a much younger and lesser developed concept. As school became a more formalized institution, parents became less personally involved in their children's education (Berger, 1991). Along with this, the general acceptance of teaching as a profession perpetuated the idea that teachers were professionals who expected parents to simply be supportive without question of teachers and schools (Anfara & Mertens, 2008; Lareau, 2002).

In the shadow of the great society debates of the 1960s, "educators and policy-makers renewed focused on parent involvement as a promising way to improve educational outcomes for poor and underachieving students" (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987, p. 157). Federal government programs such as Head Start, Follow Through, and Title I programs included mandates for parent participation and looked toward the development of the whole child. Research surrounding the relationships of family and home to school emerged as evaluations surrounding the effectiveness of governmental programs and other interventions began in earnest (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Martinez (2004) notes more recent movements toward the turn of the century related to community control of schools, especially in the education of low-income children, special education students, and English language learners, and a focus on implementing strategies to promote parent, family, and community involvement. Recent research also demonstrates that parent involvement is a cornerstone of increased school efficacy in promoting student learning, motivation, and school persistence (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Demographic Framework

Finally, the rapidly changing demographics of the American public school system must be considered as the backdrop for this research. Over 84% of U.S. elementary school teachers are female, and over 82% are White (Aud et al., 2011). Of the almost 55.5 million children in American public schools, 43% percent are minorities, and more than 11 million children speak a language other than English at home, the majority of whom are Spanish speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). There is no question that the American teacher corps does not adequately reflect the composition of our schools based on gender, race, or ethnicity and that this impacts our need for a more expansive

understanding of parents and parent engagement. To be clear, teachers and students/families do not have to be from the same ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background to work together successfully. Rather, regardless of the cultural perspective of the teacher or student, the deeper the understanding of the cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of all of the constituents within an educational setting, the more likely that setting is to be conducive to learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It can be argued that teachers cannot successfully and consistently teach and fully develop children's potential without a flexible, culturally and socially sensitive framework for parent engagement.

Method

Study Description

This qualitative study was conducted as a pilot study for a larger project on parent voice in K–12 education. As researchers, we acknowledge the pedagogical and theoretical perspective we bring to this work, which maintains that parent involvement is often narrowly defined, leaving certain families, actions, and cultural traditions mostly moot in a child's educational process (Glesne, 2006; Hong, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Valdes, 1996). It is most certainly the case that this and other ideological biases informed the construction of the project at hand. Through the use of careful member checking, the employment of multiple triangulation techniques, and careful review by outside readers, we believe that our reporting of the data collected is both accurate and useful. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a major, private research university in the Midwestern United States.

Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach, we merged hypothetical ideas with qualitative data to create an inductive theory on parent voice and parent presence. After cursory exploration of the extant literature, we constructed a conceptual map of terms currently used in parent involvement literature. Glaser and Holton (2004) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) both support the use of concept mapping as a valuable part of the qualitative research process and posit that mapping allows for new theories and models to develop without being unduly influenced by existing theory. Through data collection and ongoing analysis, we hypothesized new models of parent voice and parent presence to synthesize our understanding of the parent involvement landscape.

Participants

Purposeful sampling and, specifically, theoretical sampling, was used to select participants for this study (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). By selecting a small, targeted sample, the researchers sought to both simplify

the recruitment process and to also access a group of parents who were already engaged in parent education programs and thus more likely to be articulate on the topic of parent engagement. The sampling frame, therefore, was parent participants in two local parent education programs. Selection criteria originally included only low-income parents (as determined by free and reduced lunch eligibility) who currently have children in the local public school district. During the recruitment process, these criteria expanded to include surrounding districts and parents of any income level, since participation in the parent education programs was not limited by district or income. The final sample consisted of eight mothers. Three-quarters of the women's children participated in the free and/or reduced lunch program. Participants were asked to self-identify race/ethnicity. Five women identified as African American, three as Caucasian. All of the mothers had multiple children in multiple public schools. Their children ranged in age from 1 to 25 years old. Finally, all but one participant was employed. However, two of the mothers had recently been laid off from jobs working within schools themselves. Notably, our sample consisted entirely of women, at least four of whom were single mothers.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study consisted of two data collection methods. First, two different focus groups were conducted with participants choosing to attend one of the two scheduled meetings. Focus groups were held for approximately two hours with childcare provided to encourage robust participation. One participant contributed her thoughts via an interview spanning approximately 50 minutes in length in lieu of participating in a focus group due to scheduling conflicts. (See Appendix for focus group/interview script.) Second, parent participants were asked to write hypothetical letters to a "teacher" of their choice about their family, themselves, and their children as they saw these groups related to education.[2] All participants were able to participate in the writing process unaided, but mechanisms were in place for non-English speakers and/or those who might have been functionally illiterate. Data remained anonymous and confidentiality was assured for the participants.

As with all qualitative research, data analysis was an ongoing process throughout transcription, coding, and writing processes. Data were transcribed by hand and coded using an open coding model, with attention to constant comparison between participants. Data were sorted into thematic units and subjected to axial coding, looking for additional categories and groupings (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004). During open coding, data were then cross-referenced with coded letters to find additional subcategories and agreement amongst source material. Open coding allowed for themes based

on both frequency and depth of discussion (saturation) of a given idea. Lastly, axial coding was used to group ideas based on the constituent groups or arenas addressed by participants. As grounded theory suggests, these themes and arenas directly informed the creation of the model presented in the discussion section. As Patton (2001) advocates, two separate triangulation methods were employed with dual researcher coding (analyst triangulation) and letter versus focus group/interview comparisons (source triangulation) to substantiate both the data itself and the forthcoming model.

As part of the analytic process, the researchers examined their dimensions of objectivity, credibility, internal validity, external validity, and utilization (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We believe that the study meets the evaluative criteria of each of these standards but would be remiss if we failed to consistently acknowledge the potential impact of personal interpretations on our study results. The professor–student research team for this work allowed for some diversity of perspective regarding data interpretation due to differences in age, experience, life stage, and educational involvement. The varied perspectives allowed for a deep engagement within each phase of the study, including research design, coding, and data analysis, thereby adding to the reliability of the work.

Finally, and importantly, as we seek to complicate our understanding of parent engagement to include the ideas of parent voice and parent presence, we do so by using *all* the data our participants provided in their narratives and writing. This includes the participants' conversations about what they currently do related to involvement in their children's lives *and* those ideas which they articulated as things they *wish* to do but are not invited, allowed, or asked about in the current educational climate. Without an examination of the idealized actions presented by our participants alongside their actual reported actions we limit our analysis to a paradigm of parent engagement that does not include the possible and handicap our models from the outset. Here, too, we also seek to model how valuing voice can lead to deeper ideas and understanding about a given phenomenon.

Findings

Parent Voice and Parent Presence

Recall our understanding of parent voice and presence. Parent voice, as we defined it, is the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their understandings about their child(ren)'s and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school. These expressions may consist of parents' desires, dreams, goals, and hopes for their families and children as well as frustration, concern, or anger over isolation and exclusion. Parent presence

refers to a parent or caregiver's active involvement in their children's education, whether through formal school space (traditional activities) or "in more personal, informal spaces, including spaces created by parents themselves" (Carreón et al., 2005).

Ultimately, parents both wrote and spoke about five key arenas in which parents constructed narratives related to parent engagement: children, self (parent), family, teacher, and school. In their own words, we experience the broad ways in which these mothers conceive of their role in their children's educational process within each arena and see two distinct spaces of parent engagement emerge. First, parents describe ways in which they are present, involved, and engaged (or, in many cases, wish to be) specifically in the context of the schooling process. Second, parents describe their thoughts, understanding, and actions related to family and out of school life spaces. Together, these arenas and spaces work to reframe our understanding of parents' actions and thinking in relationship to school involvement. Thus, our first and perhaps most poignant observation is that many parents do have a great deal of motivation to support their children's education in a variety of ways and work hard to sort out the details of a given child's educational experience. Furthermore, we note that through opportunities to express themselves, parents have a great deal to offer educators, should they be open to listening. The intimate understandings of children, family, teachers, and school articulated by the participants in this study support the claim that parents are well equipped to participate in the educational process of their children and should have the opportunity to do so in meaningful and safe ways on a regular basis, just as Auerbach (2009, 2011, 2012) advocates.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Child: Building Relationships and Parent Advocacy

Data supported parents' desire for teachers to not only "know" their children on a cognitive/academic level, but also on a personal level. Trina, a parent of five children ranging in age from 1 to 11 noted, "Because this is my thing—I know my child better than anybody else in this school, and this is how I do every one of my kids when I meet their teacher." Trina was describing her process of sharing information with new teachers and felt strongly that teachers should be asking parents about their children regularly. Trina is unique in that she has the desire and agency to provide this information to her child's teacher whether she is asked or not.

Some parents were not as comfortable sharing information about their children at the beginning of our work together, many out of fear of what educator assumptions might result from receiving additional information. Their

descriptions of their children came with caveats that they did not readily share information like this with teachers except when asked. Here we see compliance with the unwritten rule "speak only when spoken to" that children are often asked to adhere to by adults. Without opportunities such as this research project to share ideas, one might assume parents do not have anything of significance to share about their children, which is, at least for the women working on this project, entirely untrue. Three categories of information—related to children, parent advocacy, and building relationships between families and school—emerged in our findings. First, parents all eagerly described their children's potential to us. Second, parents provided what they thought to be useful descriptive information about their child's behaviors and needs. Lastly, parents were apt to share information related to concerns they have for their children in academic settings. In each instance, their examples are compelling and connected to related action on the part of the parents.

Within the data, there emerged an overwhelming desire from parents for teachers to have high expectations for their children. This was indicative of omnipresent and often implicit parental belief in their children's potential. One parent noted, "As a parent I have only three expectations for my kids: to be kind, responsible, and follow the rules." Another parent, Serena, took a different approach, writing about how "bright" her children are and that they "know that there is nothing they can't achieve." Amy wrote that her son has a "good, strong mind." Parent praise from Trina was a story, "I mean, her teacher was very hard on her….My daughter got straight A's on this last report card. She, the teacher, called me after school and said, 'You need to be very proud. She worked her tail off.'" Consistent among all the parent comments was the expectation for teachers to hold children in high regard. Parents supported these high expectations vis-à-vis phone calls with the teacher and clear explication of expectations at home.

The second aspect of parent voice related to the child focused on building relationships through the sharing of information. Parents wanted to provide information about their child that might be helpful for a teacher to know. Parents described health issues, academic needs, and again, expectations for their children and how they wanted opportunities to tell teachers these things. Amy described one of her children in her writing to his teacher, "Xavier can be sensitive at times, talkative also. At times he can be hot headed…." In her letter, Serena shared her belief that "keeping kids [including hers] busy keeps them out of trouble." Amy also noted the difficulties her child had with eating during school. Jen, mother of two high school students, made a point about older children needing parent involvement "even though they are 13, 14, and 15." In each case, we see evidence of parents as advocates who, if they were asked,

would provide information they believed would help their child and further solidify the parent–teacher–student relationship.

Finally, parents also took a great deal of care in the letters they wrote to alert teachers to unique characteristics of their children, especially concerns about their child's development or academic progress. Latisha pointed out that her son's IEP recognized the importance of a teacher understanding her child's special needs. She appreciated this and wished for more interaction with the special education professionals. Amy noted that one of her children had asthma. Lisa wanted to be sure that the teacher knew her children have medical conditions including ADHD, depression, and arthritis that impact their abilities. For Amy and Lisa, having a space to discuss and make sure the basic health needs of their children are taken care of in the school setting was an important undertaking. Donna made the comment,

> I would like to meet the teachers. One time, the younger one escaped [me meeting her teachers]. They didn't let me go conference with one, and I say, "Hey? You have a teacher yet? I must meet the teacher"…so then last semester I met him...and I know she's [her daughter] fine, but I mean, it's one way or the other [meeting the teacher].

Donna's recognition of the importance of "checking in" with teachers is additional evidence of the natural inclination of parents to build relationships with educators and to communicate concerns related to their children. Conversely, the participants in this work were more than happy to hear concerns or comments the teacher might have about their children. Echoing Donna's comment, Lisa expressed a host of concerns that she would inform a teacher about if given the opportunity. She said,

> It [absence of his father] has caused some emotional turmoil for Beau. He still is looking for him to step up and be a "dad." He has also suffered from depression due to these issues as well. He has some bad days still where he gets real sad and emotional. Mostly, when that happens, he's looking for someone other than me to talk to and be understanding.

In each instance, parents wanted the hypothetical teachers to really "know" their children—the unique and wonderful things about their children as well as their strengths and weaknesses. As they discussed their letters, it was clear that they thought the teachers might know about some of these concerns but that parents were rarely asked to provide information above and beyond the "basics," as one mother put it. As Latisha, a mother who described herself as a "hard-working, Black female" eloquently noted,

> Don't put my child in a box. He is not like anyone else you've ever taught. He is capable. He has music in his head. He may not sit perfectly still. He does not need Ritalin. Do not label him….

The depth of detail that these mothers shared about their children in their letters to the teachers and through their discourse was evidence of deep engagement and meaningful activity with their children in everyday life. This is a major facet of parent presence in the truest sense of the word—attending to the day in and day out needs of a child without pause and making clear connections between this sacred work of the everyday and the larger picture of parent engagement.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Self: Behavioral and Cultural Modeling

Again, participants did not immediately share much information about their individual lives at the outset of the focus groups. Yet, in the process of our discussions, many personal stories and anecdotes emerged capturing the idea of parents' perceptions of themselves. These examples illuminate the fact that the mothers saw themselves as individuals who needed to model and, in some cases, explicitly defend what being a good, hard working parent in their particular cultural context meant.

Many descriptions of self came from the hypothetical letters to teachers that the women wrote. As a reminder, in these letters, participants were free to write whatever they desired regarding their family, lives, and children to a child's teacher.[3] Two categories have emerged from our data sources. First, the participants framed their identities in terms of their parenting practices. Next, they provided descriptions of themselves and narratives of their willingness to be involved with their child's school in ways which were feasible given their work and space circumstances but often less traditional.

Interestingly, parents all took the time to frame themselves first as parents in their letters; they did not introduce themselves to teachers in terms of their employment or with individual characteristics in mind immediately, but as mothers/parents. For example, Serena, mother of three, began her letter by saying, "I'm a loving and devoted mother." Amy introduced herself as "Xavier's mom;" Lisa started off with "My name is Lisa, mother of Jack and Matthew…I am a single parent." The fact that these parents construct their identity focused on their role as a parent is a clue regarding their level of involvement in their children's lives.

Parents also shared descriptions of their parenting. These descriptions included strong statements about the compassionate relationships these parents have with their children. Ebony asserted, "I am a parent who cares, and I am here for my child." Amy, declared "I'm very direct and to the point and very involved in my child's life." Serena shared, "I started off raising my kids as a single mother. I will say it was very challenging for me, but as a parent/mother,

I was there for every important event." These parents felt as if it was necessary to explain to teachers that they care for and support their child, as opposed to thinking the teachers will automatically assume this. As Latisha affirmed, "I would say on my behalf, I'm a parent first and foremost. Anything. A job. Whatever. My child comes first." In these descriptions we see parent presence emerge in the form of playing the role of provider: "doing whatever it takes," being "very involved." and "being at every important event."

Parents' self-description also seemed designed to counter negative assumptions or stereotypes that they experienced or that they believed teachers may harbor. Donna, an African American woman, described herself and warned against judging solely on outside appearances:

> …I'm a unique person, everybody is unique, doesn't mean that if I'm this way, or I look this way, my children don't have a way of surviving, and so perceiving individuals from the physical appearance doesn't always count for, there's more to it. You have an open mind and share.

Latisha cautioned teachers against making quick assumptions about her life based solely upon demographic characteristics:

> Don't assume that low income means low intelligence or low caring. I raise my children to the best of my ability…I am a hard-working, Black female. I don't sell drugs or walk the streets. Please don't put me in a box. I am well educated.

Again, the fact that Latisha felt the need to counter assumptions was powerful evidence of the view parents believe teachers have of them. In part, it is this process of clearing up assumptions, both coming and going, that allows teachers and parents to connect in new, robust, positive, and productive ways. Setting aside assumptions and engaging in listening matters to the educative process. Here, too, we note the active component of leading by example that these parents are espousing in their letters.

In another way, Amy models a powerful means of having her voice heard when she says, "I found that, when I would call [teachers], it wasn't near as effective [as writing]. It [the writing] made me feel better because they had to listen to me." Amy is not only noting her need to be heard but the fact that she has found and uses a particular communication strategy (writing) to insist that her presence is not ignored.

Lastly, parents expressed their willingness to be actively involved with their children's lives. At the end of the day, these parents wanted to be even more active in their children's lives at school than was formally allowed by the schools their children attended. Serena says, "I'm willing to listen and want to have a good relationship with my children's teachers." In this quote we see Lisa model

the behavior she expects from her children's teachers: "I will keep you informed as well with what's going on, or if you have any questions, call me." Lisa had important information to share about her son's life but seemed to need a teacher to be willing to ask for it. Note the behavioral modeling that Lisa tries to exhibit for her children with her proposed communication strategy.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Family: Providing Basic Needs and Cultural Modeling

The participants discussed a variety of facets about parenting roles and challenges. Parents mentioned being single parents, working, having a limited income, race, spirituality, and having implied and explicit expectations as a family for their children's educational endeavors. Three notable findings related to parent voice and presence emerged. First, parents were able and willing to share specific information and details related to their family life, but not necessarily directly related to schooling. In these instances, parents recognized that sharing some types of information could be considered tangential or inconsequential to academic performance to some educators. Sharing information was a risky proposition for these parents, one that perhaps might make them seem less in tune with what information was, in fact, important to school in the teacher's eyes. In reality, the hesitation was far more about their perceptions of the lack of safe spaces for expressing ideas than about anything else. The participants' thoughtfulness about the potential risks involved in sharing too much information demonstrates their desire as parents to do not only what is best for their child but also what is safest. This was evidenced by the powerful action some of the women took as they crossed out writing about their personal circumstances even in their hypothetical letters.

Our data reflect a general consensus on the part of the parents that being "involved" in school does not stop with homework or volunteering in the classroom but demands a constant attentiveness to the basic needs of their children. In the focus groups, the mothers discussed at length working hard to give their children "everything" they need and the implied judgment on families from schools and teachers at times. Amy brought up how offended she was when her child brought home a "contract" related to home practices:

> I was rubbed very wrong by this. It was telling me, you know, you make sure your kids get to sleep, you make sure your kids do their homework, you make sure they go to school dressed clean, and I'm thinking—don't, what, how dare you? Of course this is gonna happen. You're gonna make me sign something that says I'm doing this? Kiss my ass. Excuse me, but I was like, you're crazy. I didn't sign it.

Amy was offended by the suggestion that she would not, without a reminder via this contract, meet the basic needs of her child. Her statement (quoted above) garnered a robust discussion amongst the mothers about implications of this request; namely, if a child comes to school unkempt, hungry, tired, or without homework done that somehow this was desirable or the fault of the parent without reason. The group agreed there is no "benefit of the doubt" for parents in educational spaces. Here we see the notion of deficit thinking creep into the experiences our participants recounted so carefully.

From our limited time with the mothers it is very clear that these types of assumptions and actions on the part of the schools are part of what make family circumstances and details of family life difficult for parents to share with educators. This was especially evident in the letter written by Latisha who wrote poignant ideas only to cross them out, including the following comments: "my income is limited but..." and "I have to be both parents at times." She was clearly filtering what she wanted a teacher to know, even in a hypothetical situation. Ebony made sure to drive the point home that "he [her child] does come from a single parent home, but he does have a parent…and siblings who…are there for him to give him the support that he needs." In each of these cases we hear the implied, fierce defense of these mothers who assert that they not only provide the basic needs of their children but far, far more in the way of love, protection, stimulation, and time. The implication of these ideas on the notion of parent presence is important since it is, in most cases, the school that implies with a parent contract that everyday caregiving is activity directly and necessarily related to schooling.

Another mother, Donna, asked the teacher to "start her day with a prayer" providing insight into the value she places on praying as a part of daily life. She went on to say, "Do not overlook the spiritual tests of students and their families." Here again we see the protection of the right to a spiritual life as part of fulfilling basic needs. Donna was also quick to make the point that, "failure [of a child academically] comin' back to you [the parent] doesn't mean the teachers or schools aren't doing their jobs, it might be whatever is happening at home." Amy made note of a related idea,

> I would say, if there was a divorce happening or a recent death in the family or anything, you know, like that, you'd want them to know. And what your expectations are. You know, that this is what you expect.

In each of the examples above, parents communicated sensitive information (or sometimes decided to cross out sensitive information) to teachers in ways that indicated a great deal of thoughtfulness and an understanding of the connection between home circumstances and school life. In addition, these data

display yet again a fierce commitment these parents have to understanding their child's unique circumstances.

Parents also expressed their desire for more involvement at the school level. Multiple mothers pointed out that they would like to see more men involved in schools with their children, not only as teachers but in terms of families and the community. Latisha pointed out the idea that schools "need more community involvement, as a whole. I mean, there are so many churches in the area, you know if you got churches to volunteer you might have more men." Serena seconded this idea, noting,

> I think there should be more mentors, men mentors, for the lil' children who don't have men in their lives…for all races that need a male figure just to be there. There just needs to be more of that…yeah, we need some more men.

Embedded in this thoughtful exchange about children needing more men to look up to and have as mentors was an overt attempt on the part of the research participants to bring to the forefront of our conversation the absence of fathers in their lived experiences. The group recognized this as an issue related to both race and class that they were working to think through. The suggestion that the schools partner with local churches to recruit male mentors is steeped in a rich history of Black churches being the seat of community participation and cultural wealth. Here we see an idea for action relating to cultural practices and historical context as well as parent's advocating for a holistic sense of well being for their children. Finally, there were notable instances where race as it related to the family was part of our conversations. Latisha shared a story about her daughter experiencing racism in her middle school classroom and the lack of opportunity she was given to follow up on what her daughter communicated:

> I remember when my older daughter was in middle school and had a Black teacher and she said, "Mom, this lady don't like Black kids." I'm like, "What do you mean, she's a Black teacher, how could she not like Black kids?"…so I followed protocol…and that was the one teacher that would not let me in her classroom, even after 24 hours notice.

She continued by saying,

> I think that they could probably go out and try, and try and bring in more Black parents, because it kind of seems that, um [long pause] I don't think that they [the school] don't quite understand, like, the Black family, and I don't think they are trying to understand.

Latisha's thoughts on race and Black culture were supported by others. Donna said, "I should be accepted like they would like to be accepted in any social gathering…everybody is unique…and so perceiving individuals from their physical appearance doesn't always count for, there's more to it." Comments about involving Black families and finding additional opportunities for minority mentors were spread throughout the focus group transcripts in smaller instances, as well. In each example, the mothers recognized how important it was for their children to be proud of who they were and the cultural and ethnic backgrounds that they were associated with, especially in cases where the other children, teachers, or school officials acted in ways that are contrary to these positive beliefs. The participants also recognized that part of their job as engaged parents would have to be to counterbalance some of the negative ways different cultural groups, individuals, or ideas are portrayed in school settings, as was the case with Latisha's daughter's experience.

Overall, parent voice about family, meeting basic needs, and modeling cultural identity has particularly unique dimensions to it, especially given how risky sharing these aspects of themselves seemed to the parents. It includes sharing information about family circumstances, a plea for additional opportunities for engagement, and in some cases, charges to be more racially and culturally sensitive.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the Teacher: Relationship Building and Traditional Involvement

Parents' expectations regarding their children's teachers dominated focus group conversations at times. Upon examination, this heavy focus can be partially attributed to the way in which the focus group questions were framed, that is, with an emphasis on school climate and culture (see Appendix). Two salient ideas emerge from these data points. First, each parent in our study considered teachers the primary contact and conduit for information, teaching, and learning with respect to individual children and educational settings. Second, parents had distinct and specific ideas regarding how teachers should behave in order for their children to succeed. The participants felt strongly about teachers being the primary point of contact in schools and classrooms being the primary space to develop a greater understanding of the actions and ideas associated with family–teacher relationships and traditional parent involvement. Parent understanding of education and teachers is a critical aspect of parent voice, as it opens the pathway for a two-way line of communication between parents and teachers, specifically as it relates to a child's learning. Likewise, opening lines of communication thoughtfully also allows parents to examine and better understand any preconceived notions they might have

about teachers, leading to more effective parent presence within the traditional confines of the teacher–parent relationship and to a clearer picture of parent engagement.

Participants focused their discussion regarding teachers around the need for high expectations and appropriate levels of challenge for children, successful communication, and the importance of personal relationships between teachers and their students. Trina, mother of five, wanted teachers to "give my child the best education that's out there." Another parent added, "As an educator, it's your job to make sure that they learn." Latisha, also a mother of five, said this about one of her children:

> My son has an IEP. I expect him to be included in whatever is going on in the classroom. Please don't put him on the computer to keep him "busy" until you are finished teaching the others. I expect you to teach my children.

The desire on the part of the parents for a teacher to maintain high expectations went beyond simply noting that there had to be high standards. Interestingly, parents also briefly discussed the need for teachers to have a mastery of classroom management techniques and content expertise. High expectations without the ability to deliver high quality content and support a child's motivation is not sufficient, according to the parent participants. Parents recognized that high expectations, expertise in content, and classroom management knowledge are all three necessary components of successful classroom teaching. What's more, parents were able to articulate those ideas. This articulation indicated a more sophisticated level of engagement and understanding of educational pedagogy than what is typically ascribed to parents. As Serena noted, "If my child needs to be challenged—challenge him." Likewise, another seconded, "I expect you to challenge him and not let him slide by." Parents did not want their children's abilities and strengths overlooked or written off by teachers, particularly not as a result of assumptions based on gender, race, or disability. Latisha was adamant in her plea for her son's teacher not to overlook his abilities, "Don't put my child in a box...He is capable!...Do not label him."

The parent participants in our work set very high expectations for teacher behavior, particularly as it pertained to communication between teacher and home. However, the parent comments privileged traditional models of parent–teacher interaction. For these mothers, the teacher was expected to instigate most, if not all, conversations/communication about their children; phone calls home, teacher-suggested conferences, and notes home from school were seen as desirable. Interestingly, by defining the communicative process as primarily beginning with the teacher, these parents inadvertently demonstrate

the lack of agency many parents feel when it comes to communicating with teachers and schools. They seem to be responding to an already embedded belief in a "teacher as expert" model that can unintentionally lead educators and caregivers to believe parents are somehow less capable of knowing and sharing important information about their children related to the educational process. Thus, it is important to expand models of parent voice and presence to privilege conversations about children in a holistic manner. This expansion in understanding not only creates a sense of shared values but, most importantly, supports fluid bidirectional dialogue among teachers and parents.

Successful, authentic communication was an important factor in how parents viewed their overall relationship with teachers and schools and their ability to interact within the school environment. All but one parent specifically cited experiences and situations where communication was positive and allowed the parents to feel welcome within the school. For example, being kept abreast of what is happening in school was important to parents. Ebony noted, "As soon as something is goin' on, they're on the phone, they call me. His teacher emails me regularly." Trina appreciated having several communication options:

> We have a choice, as parents, to either get it in the newsletter or email, AND she also calls if we like it. You know, she tells us at the beginning of the school year to give numbers, pagers, whatever, and she will—and she does—she takes the time out every day.

Despite these descriptions of positive experiences, negative school encounters and communications were by far more the norm than not. "I can't get them to call me" and other similar phrases were common throughout the interview/focus groups. Serena remarked, "Good luck on teachers callin' you back," while Latisha mentioned, "They don't really call for good things. You get a phone call if your child's misbehaved." At times, parents wanted to be involved with their child's education and tried to communicate with teachers through conventional methods such as telephoning but were unsuccessful. This history of missed communication opportunities affected these mothers, and many ended their writing with phrases such as "Don't hesitate to call." Latisha added, "My number will always be available." Lisa said, "I will work with you in any way necessary and support you 100% as long as you communicate with me. If there should be a problem, please call or email." These quotes show active engagement and attempts to communicate with teachers despite past negative experiences. Here again, we see the traditional notion of the teacher having control of the lines of communication even when the parents were trying or willing to communicate with teachers.

Thankfully, when parents were speaking about teachers, they were also apt to describe the rapport and the connection that they had made with the

handful of particularly great teachers responsible for educating their children. Trina noted "One year, me and my daughter's teacher, we sat down for a half an hour and talked. Like, literally…." Lisa was inspired after forming a relationship with her son's guidance counselor: "I want to be a school counselor, I decided…I saw the difference that Jack's school counselor made, and…that's what I want to do." Here we see not only the importance of the relationship of Lisa's son to the counselor but the impact it had on Lisa as well. Serena, a mother of three, explained her relationship with her son's first grade teacher,

> She was nice; she was welcoming. "Come anytime," you know. She always called and invited me or vice-versa…she used to come to his basketball games. She was a really nice lady, really, really nice. So, it made me, you know, feel a lot welcome.

Serena's example, along with Lisa and Trina's short anecdotes, support a model of engagement that includes both voice and presence even in a traditional format. Parent engagement must consider an asset-based model of presence seen not only in parents' volunteering but in how parents seek out communication and relationship opportunities outside of those traditional spaces.

Parent Voice and Presence Regarding the School: Parent Advocacy and Traditional Involvement

Focus group questions regarding parent voice also addressed ideas and perceptions of the larger institution of education. Parent concerns and understanding regarding institutional issues receive relatively little consideration in existing models of parent involvement. Our data suggest that this is an important oversight, as several significant themes for parents emerged from our data: negative parent perceptions of school to home communication, the subordination of parent roles in educational decision making, a lack of opportunities for parent participation in school activities, and the need for additional resources for public schools to fully engage children and parents.

As suggested above, one of the aspects of education that parent participants focused on was past negative experiences within schools. This is doubly important given that no interview questions were framed in such a way as to suggest experiences of a negative nature. Parents relayed stories of miscommunication and misunderstanding between home and school. Some parents spoke of children being disciplined at school and school administrators being unsure why. Lisa said,

> I got a message, and so I called back, and the lady who called me to tell me that my son got in trouble couldn't even tell me what he got in trouble for. You know, I would ask questions, "Well, what happened?"…

> Well, "I don't know, I'm gonna have to ask someone."…It's really frustrating.

Latisha explained a similar situation involving her high school son,

> …so I actually went to the school board on a principal. Last year, my high schooler, well, he got jumped at high school, and whoever the guy was that jumped him, he beat the guy…and I wanted to see the videotape; the principal wouldn't let me. So…I mean that was a side [of me] that wouldn't normally come out, but my child got injured in your [the principal's] building, and you don't seem to care.

Another story of serious miscommunication between a mother and her son's school emerged in this conversation,

> I worked in [another town], and I got a call from Jack one day, you know, "Mom, are you coming to get me?" and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well you called the school and said that I had an appointment and that I was to wait outside after school, 'cuz you were coming to pick me up." No, I didn't…I was furrrious, you know, of course, I was scared to death, because I work in [other town]. So she [a friend's mom] took him home for me, and I went into the school, and the people in the office were so rude, sooo rude. And their response to me was, "What do you expect us to do?" You know, "We have all these kids to keep track of." I said, "Why was my child told to wait outside?"… they were just so rude, and just took no responsibility for that, and "It's not our fault, you know we have too many kids to keep track of." We wrote six letters, to the superintendent, to the principal, and I don't even remember who else they all went to, and I never got one response from anyone in the school corporation. Not an apology, not a nothing.

While the examples of poor school to home communications here are powerful in their own right, in each instance, what is perhaps most noteworthy is that parents did feel upset enough to voice their frustrations within the confines of this study. In all of the three cases noted here, the parents also felt strongly enough that they expressed their concerns to school administrators but to no avail. Their attempts to be present by becoming an advocate for safer, clearer, and transparent rules were not successful. From their vantage point, their lack of success in communicating concerns was *in spite* of the fact that they were trying to act in ways that followed the appropriate channels for voicing concerns to school officials.

Another theme to emerge from the data is parent subordination within the educational decision making process. These unfortunate instances can highlight the advocacy work of many parents when responded to appropriately.

By way of example, Amy tells a story of her twins being separated into two difference classrooms against her wishes. She notes that she was told it was a "district policy" to separate twins. Eventually, she found out this was not the case and fixed the circumstances for her children. Similarly, Lisa noted, "I've had a better relationship with security people at this school than with the actual educators." Ebony discussed the fact that she was given a hard time as she tried to do an intradistrict transfer, saying,

> when I transferred my son from one school to another school, because we moved and I wanted him to be in the right school for the district, um, they gave us a hard time…he was told that, you know, he didn't do well at his other high school, what makes you think he'll do better here?

In each of the previous examples, Ebony, Lisa, and Amy describe situations in which they were not afforded the respect or deference that one might expect as a concerned parent. In fact, in Ebony's case, it was implied by her child's educators that that they believed that she did not know what would be best for her child in the given circumstance—a traditional model of educational power.

Despite this, the parents in our study were clearly invested in their children's education and ready to act. Parents wanted not only to be informed about changes and respected as decision makers, but they also wanted to be involved in a capacity congruous with their daily lives. This is why the notion of advocacy enters into a model of parent presence so solidly. As Latisha asserted, "I am not always able to volunteer in the building, but if you need me to do something, please call me." Despite the challenges that these mothers face in raising children, they care deeply about teachers and schools and are keen to be included.

Another significant theme to emerge during data analysis was the opportunity (or lack thereof) as students get older for parents to participate in traditional school activities such as receiving and responding to newsletters, lunchtime visits, homework help, and conferences. The majority of parents related positive experiences of parent inclusion within different elementary schools but not as readily with upper level schools. As Jen noted,

> They [the elementary and middle schools] welcome the parents. I go in and have lunch with my sixth grader…and it, well, keeps me abreast of what's going on, too, because I can place a name and a face now with the kids who my kids are referring to.

Latisha adds, "[This elementary school] welcomes with open arms…just even coming in and working in your child's classroom or in the library…coming to 'em at lunch time." Similarly, Serena said of her son's school, "[It's] pretty good on getting families together. Keeping you involved, so, I like that." These

positive experiences of inclusion made parents feel welcome and a part of their children's lives. However, involvement in these ways did not change the overall perception of parents being on the "outside" of their children's educational experiences. With more respect for family lives and actions outside of the school walls, the chance to expand the notion of what families and, by extension, children can do is a powerful possibility.

Trina made it clear that middle and high school settings were not nearly as family friendly, saying, "And with middle school…I don't think that they have so much of a good open door policy as elementary." Amy agreed, saying, "But they didn't try to get you very involved, now that I think about it, when he was in high school." Others described involvement as a choice that families and parents have to make, sometimes under difficult circumstances. Amy continued, "and the open house was…was like, uh, speed dating, is what it seemed like." Still, on a different note, Donna observed, "I mean…we all busy, but you have to choose to, to also be there [at the school] knowing that your children…knowing that you are interested in them, in visiting, or have concerns." Yet again, we see examples here of trying to engage traditional school processes.

Parents voiced their understanding that the idea of parent engagement seemed to change when children reached a certain age and discussed traditional means of parental involvement. In addition to the lack of opportunities, some parents also expressed a similar sense of disillusionment with their ability to support and advocate for their children once they get older. As Serena, a mother of three children aged 5–15, declared, "Not much you can really do for high school, for your child in high school." Parents' beliefs that they have little impact on their children's success in high school is sobering and, again, warrants careful attention to the role of parent voice, especially as children get older.

Finally, the mothers in the study were quite cognizant of disparities in resources from district to district. In fact, some participants discussed using their knowledge of local school systems and of the social, economic, and cultural capital they possessed specifically to move to certain areas so that their children could attend particular public schools. Here we see parent presence via advocacy taken to a new level; no longer is the advocacy simply about the teacher–student or teacher–parent relationship. Advocacy now becomes about understanding all facets of the larger picture of a school and community space. The participants recognized that some parents lack the financial means to move to better school districts and not all parents are capable of providing their children with extra resources, such as personal tutoring, as evidenced by the remarks of Ebony, mother of three, "But a lot of times, some parents can't, you know, some families can't do that [get outside academic help]." Data also indicate that parents grasped the challenges faced by schools with limited resources

and that they understood how the absence of additional resources hindered the learning experiences and opportunities of their children. Trina talked extensively about the lack of resources in her elementary-aged cousin's school and how it affected her emotional well being,

> [She] would cry, you know, because she's havin' a meltdown, and she wants to talk to someone. They told her that they didn't have nobody to talk to her like that because there was so many kids up in that school with more problems than what she was having.

The shortage of guidance counselors in her elementary school negatively impacted Trina's cousin, suggesting that in some schools, the social and emotional well being of students is delegated to only a few counselors or social workers who cannot realistically support and care for such large numbers of children. Although Trina wished she could do something about the circumstances, she felt powerless to do so given her own circumstances.

Parents also voiced their understanding of school resources in a manner that acknowledged an understanding of the larger social and political structures related to education. Donna stated, "Unfortunately education is the number one [place to cut resources]. Wherever the state has to cut anything, it has to start from the education sector, which is hurting our future leaders." Donna's voice here recognizes the importance of education in creating the next generation of leaders and also the fact that often school funding is viewed as a luxury expenditure during times of economic hardship by the local, state, and federal governments. Here we see Donna exhibit the beginning of a social protest over the lack or inequitable funding in education with little success. Overall, through their firsthand experiences with their children and their schools, the parents expressed a clear understanding of the need for additional resources in public schools. Parents also noted their desire to advocate for stronger home–school–community relationships and parent involvement at the various levels of schooling.

Discussion

Together, Parent Voice and Parent Presence Equal Parent Engagement

Our analysis of how parents conceive of their involvement in their children's lives not only elucidates the phenomena of parent thinking/parent voice, but also highlights the associated actions to undergird a robust vision of parent presence. In each instance, when parents voiced their concerns, understandings, hopes, and frustrations surrounding schools, there was also evidence of

the ways parents acted or wished to act as engaged participants in their children's lives beyond the typical homework/conferences/parent contract mode of engagement we sometimes see teachers enact. As such, this evidence supports an expanded notion of parent voice and presence. Parents were able to describe, in careful detail, facets of their educational experience with children, their families, and schools and teachers—indicating active, consistent, and attentive engagement with their children and related educational issues. In addition, the descriptions of family life and ideal family engagement scenarios provide further evidence of parent presence in school settings and/or the desire of many parents for the opportunity to be in school settings more. As we learned from our participants, parents are often caregiver/provider, double parent, cheerleader, cultural liaison, protector, and facilitator all at the same time. Importantly, parents' feedback also evidenced ample support for the notion that teaching cultural mores and norms are also part of their roles.

On a broader level, parents conveyed in various ways their willingness and desire to be engaged with the schools more than they are at the present time—one-on-one with teachers, in school activities, and even with a political voice, noting some of the fiscal strains schools have at the present time. According to our data, parents did not shy away from being involved in their children's lives, but did not always see appropriate and constant entry points for that involvement. Here again is an indication of parent presence and a desire for action that is unaccounted for in many currently used models of parent engagement. Moreover, these parent voices lead the researchers to conclude that there is, in fact, a great deal more to parenting practices and circumstances that educators can overlook when they don't see parents at conferences or on the volunteer sign-up lists for school functions. In their focus groups and letters, parents continued to parse the ways in which they wanted to be involved in regular communication with teachers and the schools and noted the ways in which they already observed, communicated, and supported their children's overall growth. Additionally, it was clear that parents want educators to know the specific ways they love and care for their children. This desire of the parents seems to have little to do with ego, but rather seems to emanate from the desire to be respected by educators as capable, loving, and supportive parents.

As mentioned at the outset of this section, coding data led to the creation of five categories or spheres about which parents were sharing information: child, self, family, teacher, and school. At first, these spheres seemed to only form the basis for the model of parent voice. Upon closer examination of the data, along with secondary coding and reflection, however, it became clear that the mothers were not simply sharing the ideas they had about a given topic. They were also providing rich data about the related actions that fit into similarly codified

categories. Therefore, with a step back into the coding process of the five parent voice categories, our understanding of parent presence also emerged, thus giving us the models presented in Figures 1 and 2.

The parent voice and parent presence models each contain two spheres of influence—home and school. Moreover, and importantly, these models capture *what parents are already doing or wish to do* as it was reported to the researchers. As such, the models presented herein diverge from traditional models in that they are not based on deficit models of parenting or remedial notions of engagement. Instead, these models stem from a desire to recognize and highlight the daily work and love of parents with children and, thereby, reflect tolerance for a broader, deeper, and more varied understanding of parent presence in the lives of children. Most significantly, these models provide multiple directions for educators to identify spaces for relationships to grow. By examining a family context through parent voice and parent presence, educators might become open to more possibilities for positive relationships to flourish.

In terms of parent voice, the categories of concern and relevance to the parents all centered on facets of the home and school life integral to the child's well being and daily existence. The data reflect that many parents reported having daily, regular conversations with their children. In addition, data demonstrated parents who were engaged in the physical, social, emotional, and educational lives of their children. Data also suggested that parents were full of future plans and hopes for their children and held educational, behavioral, and social expectations that mirrored these hopes. Specific details regarding what each family did or did not do together with children were of less consequence in generating the model of parent voice than the demonstration by parents that they were invested in their children's lives and well being from a variety of vantage points.

Parent presence is the model wherein more specific spheres of action are identifiable both within the school and the home. Within the home sphere, the components of parent presence included action via the following three portals: providing for basic needs, behavioral modeling, and cultural teaching. With regard to the school sphere, parent presence was understood as parents acting in a triad of ways: traditional school involvement, parent advocacy, and relationship building.

Ultimately, the parent voice and parent presence models were generated side-by-side, even though the parent voice data analysis was, in large part, the catalyst for uncovering the requisite understanding of data to support the parent presence model. Coding thoroughly confirmed the constituent pieces of both models. The cultural modeling aspect of parent presence derived from the observations of the parents involved in the study and evidence documenting that parents were both implicitly and explicitly influencing and honing the

cultural norms for their children through their approaches to parenting and their casual interactions with their children.
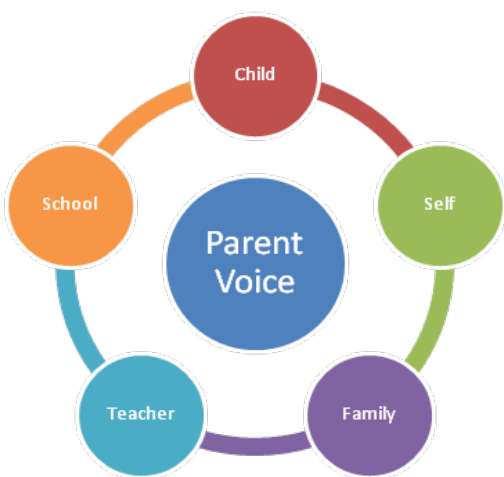
Figure 1: Parent Voice Model   Figure 2: Parent Presence Model
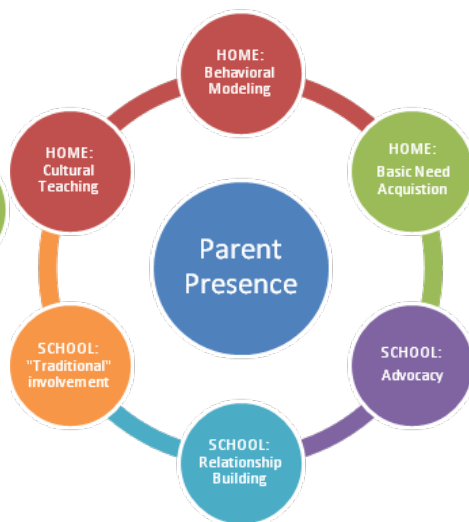
Upon deep examination, the development of a side-by-side model of parent voice and parent presence not only seemed to be a logical outgrowth of the data, but also led to a larger, more complete picture of parent engagement and, by extension, a more broadly construed understanding of family engagement. We most certainly do not claim to have invented the notion of parent engagement nor do we claim that the idea of funds of knowledge as socially, culturally, and economically bound is unique to this model. Rather, we posit that we have reframed and broadened the scope of earlier models of parent engagement in order to rectify implicit deficit model thinking. This new conception of parent engagement is inclusive and respectful of more diverse parenting styles, actions, timing, and communication between the home and school. It also, most importantly, places the *child* at the center of the model, as opposed to school, parent, or teacher.

Parent Engagement

Parent voice and parent presence, together, form parent engagement. To clarify further, parent presence does not simply reference involvement or overt participation in schools, but also includes a broad variety of subtle ways in which parents are active in a child's life, which are more difficult to quantify and measure. Likewise, parent voice does not reference inert or heretofore unheard ideas, but encompasses an authentic, two-way communicative process

between educators and family members. Such a process is necessarily predicated on the understanding of family members being more than recipients of information but also important providers of information. The parent voice and parent presence models above respect family members as experts on their child(ren) and partners in children's learning and growth. Examples of the nuances and behaviors described above are supported by numerous researchers (Auerbach, 2007, 2011; Carreón et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2011a; Mapp, 2003). As such, we conclude by tying together our findings on parent voice and presence to hypothesize a more inclusive, forward thinking, child-centered, parent friendly model of parent engagement.

Our model presented in Figure 3 below, supported by this study and extant literature and derived from a grounded theory research methodology, is the final piece of the puzzle in our exploration of parent engagement. Clearly, this model, as well as the parent presence and parent voice models, must withstand additional comparative analysis and subsequent research. Therefore, we propose that, in the meantime, these models can be of immediate use by providing (1) a starting point for examining what Jeynes (2011a) astutely refers to as the salient features of parent involvement, and/or (2) an accessible, modern, useful visual construct for engaging and instructing educators and preservice teachers about the subtle features of parent engagement, particularly those related to culture or family context.
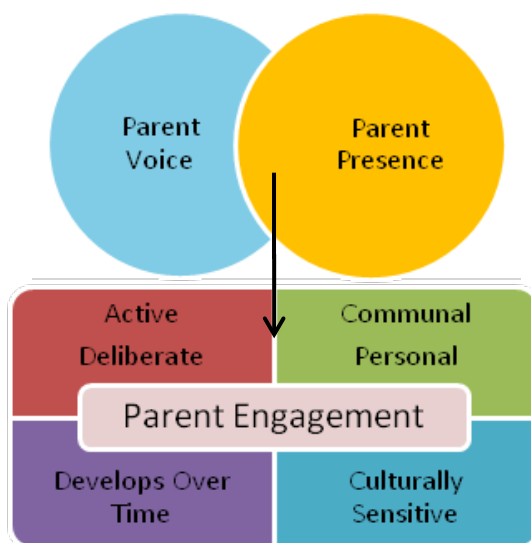
Figure 3: Contemporary Parent Engagement Model

By way of explication, the model in Figure 3 begins with the comingled components of parent voice and parent presence. Together, parent presence and parent voice lead to a holistic vision of parent engagement. Surrounding

parent engagement are the conditions that the study participants highlighted as important to the engagement process. Thus, the holistic model of parent engagement encompasses four salient conditions; engagement must develop over time and be active and deliberate, culturally sensitive, and both communally and personally based. The conditions for parent engagement to flourish include a two-way understanding for both families and educators to note and are supported by data from our participants as evidenced in the larger explanation below. We use the participant's own words to highlight the supportive conditions of parent engagement. For example, Donna's response to a query about school expectations for parents included this comment illustrating how important active parent presence is. Here we see a rather mundane description of parenting that reminds us that what parents do to be engaged always includes attending to the most basic of tasks:

> I make sure the children attend school daily, and (that) they get enough rest at home before each day and homework done—make sure they have also enough food or if eating for the day, even if they don't eat at home, then they have the choices to eat at school also.

Likewise, Lisa mentions being a "hands on parent," while Amy noted:

> And they [the teachers] want you highly involved. They're…they'll have a program going and usually, the bulletin, and it'll be for the whole month. They'll have it there so you know when it is, and then they even send you a nice big, bright blue paper, "Remember!" or "Reminder," there's so and so program or fun fair or whatever it is tonight. And stuff like that…they seem to want you very involved.

In our model we name engagement as active and deliberate as a result of comments like these.

Similarly, the mothers in our study present evidence for both a communal and personal aspect to parent engagement as well as culturally sensitive practices. These ideas are two sides of the same coin for parent engagement. Practice that is truly engaging must be both about the needs of the self and the community and must remain consistently sensitive to the cultural environment of children and families. These conditions hone in on the reciprocal and respectful nature of all engagement that Noddings (1984) so eloquently notes is critical to educational care. As Donna shared with the researchers:

> …the home has 80% to contribute to the success of their children in school. Oh yeah. I was a teacher. (*Researcher*) *So you understand the teacher's position, too*? Mmhmm…so I know all the code of conducts that they supposed to follow through, and every year I say repeat and read back to me, and I make sure you are going to abide by everything and anything

that comes with the dress codes and all that. I hold them responsible…I really…I think it's good.

Here we see the notion of engagement that considers the good of the school by following school guidelines as a larger perspective while also having roots in the individual children. Trina tells the story of personally engaging with teachers for the sake of her daughter:

And like I told my middle school daughter's teacher, she talks a lot. I'm just letting you know. She talks a lot, she has an attitude, she smacks her lips, so I just want you to be aware of that. And she doesn't like to wear her glasses, so you have to keep on her, and…I left her my number the first day, and I said if you have any problems and she keep on persisting on doin' this or that, please feel free to give me a call. And I said please— I don't give a care if it's 7:30 in the morning. I know they start school at 7:45. I'm up. So just give me a call.

Trina needs teachers to hear her request and understand her interest in her daughter's education. Trina also notices how school communities and families must engage together to figure out issues of importance, especially as they might pertain to certain family groups. Here she discussed the value of workshops helping underresourced families navigate finding funding for college:

Three or four different speakers on subjects that pertain specifically to us. Like you know, where is the free money for college? I got four kids. I got one in college; you know, which we qualify for grant money for him, but you know, what about these, I have three more to go through. And I'm planning to go back to school next year so, you know. Where does that stuff come from? And then the other stuff on disabilities. The information…it was unreal what kind of help you can get.

From a different angle, Serena noted the value of family engagement rooted in community building and fun:

They have the after school stuff…movie night, at our school. They have like a movie you can pay like five dollars for movie and popcorn so you come with your family and watch the movie. They had dance night. One time they had the fun fair. That's the only school I know that's done all this. I don't know 'bout other schools, but our school is pretty good on getting families together.

Thus, we notice in each example ways that parent engagement is both communally and personally minded. Likewise, parent engagement must be consistently culturally sensitive. Latisha, an African American mother, mentioned quite seriously one afternoon, "It should be more of the 'it takes a village to

raise a child' kinda thing…and it's not that around here." To which Serena wholeheartedly agreed. When asked about resources she would like to see for her children in schools, Serena also said:

> I think that they [the school] could probably go out and try and bring in more Black parents because it kinda seems that, um [long pause], I don't think that they quite understand, like, the Black family. And I don't think they're trying to understand. So…in that aspect, I think some more could be done.

As the participants note, parent engagement must be communally, culturally, and personally tailored.

Finally, it seems parent engagement must develop over time. It is not a "one and done" workshop or parent meeting, nor is it simply a series of teacher-led workshops. Meaningful parent engagement that honors parent presence and voice must be cultivated and sustained via students, parent and educator interactions and the environment. As Latisha described with simultaneous satisfaction and irritation:

> Our school welcomes with open arms…just even coming in and working in your child's classroom or in the library. Comin' with 'em…even my daughter will take my granddaughter and go see my son at lunchtime, and that's fine. They didn't have any problem with that…middle school and high school it's a little bit different. They're not quite as welcoming when they get older.

Here we see the struggle to hold onto relationships across school levels with only marginal success. Similarly, Lisa highlighted the importance of relationships with her thoughts on how the office staff should respond to parents:

> I'm a greeter. I'm a "hi, how are you doin'" to everybody in person. That's my thing. Um, 'cause my thing is, when you deal with the public, that's something that you have to do. Every time I've ever gone there [the school office], there's one lady in the one office who is just the nicest lady. The other office where you go for the counselors and all that…I don't know what goes on in that office, but they're not people oriented.

As it was, the participants shared with the researchers over and over the importance of educators and parents getting to know one another, consistently making contact with them, and sharing both the good and the bad sides of student life and behavior. From this came our assertion that the conditions for meaningful parent engagement are found in the four elements highlighted in the model; namely, engagement must be active and deliberate, developed over time, culturally sensitive, and involve both communally and personally oriented actions on the part of both educators and parents in a relational

nature. Together, these conditions, along with the recognition that engagement is about voice and presence, led us to the creation of a respect-laden, reality driven model of parent engagement to ponder and, hopefully, develop more fully going forward.

Reflection on Methodological Process and Outcomes

We readily acknowledge that the data collection process for this project was a single instance with a relatively small group of participants in the context of a study rooted in the grounded theory tradition. Additional limitations included a relatively short time of engagement with participants and an acknowledgement that these women may not be "typical" parents given their previous involvement in a parent education program. While the authors understand the need to point out the selectivity of our sample, we assert that this does not make the models any less valid. In fact, it is because of the thoughtfulness and investment of our participants that we were able to garner such a robust model of ideal parent engagement. The rich descriptions gathered proved fruitful for both narrative inquiry and model building related to parent voice, presence, and engagement. Additionally, multiple methods of triangulation and a clear explication of possible researcher bias allowed for fidelity in both the data collection and data analysis stages. The parents who chose to participate were clearly engaged and had a vested interest in thinking through the topic of parent engagement which we ultimately see as a positive limitation of this work.

The focus group questions allowed for additional contextual understanding with questions on teachers, administrators, classroom climate, school resources, and relationships. This approach to the script allowed for the researchers to gather data about context that might otherwise have been lost in translation. As the researchers suspected, the parents were more than eager to discuss the topics of the study. In fact, listening to them talk was analogous to watching a pressure cooker release steam. The conversation was steady, measured, and powerful. It often bubbled over into other related topics. This led to the most difficult aspect of the focus groups—attending to the time while also allowing room for each person's thoughts to be heard as openly and freely as possible, as grounded theory work dictates. Ideas about parent involvement, rules, communication, and relationships within schools all intermingled in the conversation. At times, one participant would finish the thought of another. Often, one parent would bring up an idea that the others immediately related to and would continue discussing. Many times, the mothers used specific examples to support a theoretical point they were making. Parents appeared very eager for their ideas regarding schools and their own lived experiences—

as mothers, heads of homes, and educational partners—to be heard. Some of the most hurtful examples of "noncaring" in schools provided by the women centered around teachers and administrators refusing to listen when parents needed assistance, clarification, or additional help with a given situation. The level of animation and intensity surrounding the anecdotes shared was palpable and confirmed the need for a forum or avenue for parents' voices to be heard in educational settings.

These conversations led to our emerging models of parent voice and parent presence and a breadth of support to undergird them. First, the participants confirmed many parents have perspectives and understandings of schools and school culture that they want to share. Second, the data suggested parents are far more attentive to the nuances of interactions, policies, curriculum, content, and school programs than educators often given them credit for in existing parent involvement literature and practice. Third, the parents involved in the study confirmed that the relationships and the communication paths, opportunities, and efforts between school and home are seen as essential components of schooling from their vantage point. Finally, the data overwhelmingly supported the idea that allowing parents to have a voice not only "feels" important but is important and must be seen as an essential component of engagement and as a critical indicator of the care schools have for children and families.

Data collected from the letters proved equally powerful in terms of parent voice and presence. By asking the women to participate both verbally and in writing, a different focus of parent voice emerged. In addition, the open-ended nature of the letters allowed for unfiltered writing on the part of the participants. Parents talked extensively about schools and their personal experiences within those schools in the focus groups and interview, most likely because we asked about those topics. However, when given the chance to write without any restraints or strict guidelines, the parents wrote most consistently about their children and their interactions with schools. The researchers remain surprised that the participants, in large part, neglected to specifically address the contexts of family and community.

During the research process, parents recognized that details about their lives and the lives of their children are important topics to address as part of the communicative process between home and school. Additionally, their writing indicated an understanding of why the information they were writing about could be valuable to share. Moreover, parents, while less inhibited (given the hypothetical nature of the letters), chose to write explicitly about their personal lives, sharing private, sensitive information about their family and children. Parents wrote about family circumstance, parent challenges, parenting styles, and their understanding of parental responsibility. They also clearly outlined their expectations for teachers. More often than not, these expectations

stemmed from their own experiences of educator misconceptions about their children and, at times, a lack of understanding on the part of the parents about what might go on in a classroom. The depth of the letters and the seriousness with which the parents approached the task was another powerful indicator of their desire for educators to truly know and understand the children they are serving with the hope of better educational experiences as a result.

Conclusions and Implications

A great deal of contemporary educational research has focused on the importance of parental involvement in education. It is a commonly held belief in education at this point in time that parental involvement is a key factor in children's school achievement. Significant associations have been found between parental engagement during the early years of education and overall long-term school success (Barnard, 2004; Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2011a, 2011b). Beyond traditional expectations including being involved through attending parent–teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, helping with projects and homework, and reading at home, this study situates itself in the newer generation of parent engagement and home–school–community partnership literature by theorizing about a more inclusive understanding of parent engagement, specifically the constituent pieces of parent voice and parent presence. This is, in large part, to respect, share, and acknowledge the parenting practices of lower income and minority parents that are, at times, misunderstood and undervalued by school staff and administrators. We believe that the models of parent voice, parent presence, and parent engagement presented here can withstand additional comparative analysis and deserve attention as a modern understanding of parents' role in the educational process. The models presented warrant further investigation, especially within different minority groups, different regions of the country, and with different age groups of parents of both genders. As Glaser and Holton (2004) note:

> Only as the researcher discovers codes and tries to saturate them by theoretical sampling in comparison groups, do the successive requirements for data collection emerge—both (1) what categories and their properties to be sampled further, and (2) where to collect the data. By identifying emerging gaps in the theory, the analyst will be guided as to next sources of data collection and interview style. (para. 51)

All models, regardless of the manner in which they are developed, ought to be tested, and, if necessary, reconfigured to more accurately reflect what reality indicates in particular circumstances, especially when the goal is a culturally sensitive model of a specific area or idea. Additional areas for future

exploration should include additional studies in the parent voice arena, teacher education with respect to parent/caregiver engagement, and parent engagement specific to the various levels of preK–12 education. A meta-analysis of the extant ethnically and racially specific parent voice literature would be helpful toward creating a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of parent voice. Likewise, work with specific populations, such as male parents or parents based on age, may prove useful.

As our research suggests, this parent engagement model can be useful for all educational stakeholders, but should prove especially helpful to classroom teachers. Using this model within teacher learning and educational leadership training paradigms could help foster new understandings of parent engagement for teachers, the educators who interact with parents most frequently. Expanding the understandings and information that teachers have of parents could be the first step toward establishing this new ethic of parent engagement in schools. Research regarding the application of the model in teacher education and educational leadership programs or professional development would be ideal. Finally, future investigations could include additional attention to the voice of fathers and different parent engagement models with specific attention to middle and high school level students and their families. Our research indicates that parents perceive changing opportunities to participate in schools as their children age, and exploring new models of engagement in these arenas could prove useful. Such studies could assess the current nature of parent engagement at the middle and high school levels and consider new ways of creating home–school partnerships using the parent engagement model.

Parent/caregiver engagement impacts schools, families, and, most poignantly, children in indisputable and important ways. Honoring that which is real, useful, and culturally sensitive regarding parent engagement in education is a test of our commitment to public education at large. Engaging parents in respectful, meaningful, reciprocal avenues of communication is a commitment to the civic-minded, democratic, community-centered principles our schools were, ideally, founded upon. Schools and educators who are willing to put aside assumptions and preconceptions about parenting and the abilities of children and their families based on race and class will go a long way toward moving education forward. New concepts of family and parent engagement must be attentively and rigorously examined. Incomplete perspectives about parents and families prevent the "out of the box" thinking which Latisha mentioned and which can be seen as a primary need for school systems as they continue to become more diverse, if they are to teach and serve students completely. The development of cooperative, sensitive cadres of adults whose central goal is to work in conjunction with one another for the benefit of the child is a feasible framework for tapping into the resources offered by parent voice and parent

presence. Creating these partnerships is not simple, nor is it something that can be readily created in the absence of the context of working models. Parent engagement is a relational endeavor that requires ongoing motivation and mutual respect. Inclusive, culturally relevant models that accurately represent the perspective of parents will help in further expanding educator and policymaker perspectives about parents, children, and the educational process in useful ways which will allow everyone involved to more closely approximate an ideal partnership on behalf of children.

Endnotes

[1]All names are pseudonyms to protect research participant anonymity.

[2]The prompt for this writing exercise was as follows: "If you could write anything about your family, children, life, or experience with your child(ren)'s school(s) to a teacher you know with no ramifications, what would you write? These letters are confidential and will not be shared with your children's teachers."

[3]In the explanation of the project, it was made completely clear to participants that the letters they were writing were only for our research purposes and that we could not, even if we wanted to, share them with anyone outside of our research context. However, participants were encouraged to decide on their own, outside of the context of our study, if they wanted to think about giving a copy of the letter they wrote to their child's teachers. Notably, none of the participants asked for a copy of their letter and many remained worried about who would "read" their letters.

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Appendix: Focus Group/Interview Script

Section #1—Parent/School Relationship
• In your experience, what role does your child's school expect you, and other parents, to play in their child(ren)'s education?
• How does your school communicate information with parents? Can you give me some examples? Do you think their methods are satisfactory?
• How do you communicate with the school? Do you wish there were other ways to communicate?

Section #2—School Participation
• Do you believe your child's school makes it easy for parents to participate in their child's education? Why or why not?
• Can you describe ways your child's school provides opportunities for parent participation? What about opportunities for family participation?

Section #3—Climate and Culture of Public School System
• How would you describe the climate of your child's school? By climate, I mean the feeling parents get when they enter the school building, the way the school is set up, the attitudes of the students in the school, how parents and students are treated by the school staff, etc.
• On a scale of 1–5, 5 being excellent and 1 being terrible, how well do you think your child's school is doing educating your child academically? socially/emotionally?
• Can you describe the behavioral expectations the school has for your child during school hours? How do you know what these expectations are?

Section #4—Parent Voice
• What resources, above and beyond what your child(ren) have now, do you think your child(ren) would benefit from most? By resources I mean opportunities, physical things, support systems, information, etc. Why are the things you mentioned important to you?
• Finally, what do you want teachers to know about you, your child(ren), your family, and your life? Just think about it for a little bit. Tell me about it. In just a moment, this is what we would like you to express in the letters you will write to a fictional teacher. Think of this as a short brainstorm about that.

Continuity and Variability in the Parental Involvement and Advocacy Beliefs of Latino Families of Young Children: Finding the Potential for a Collective Voice

Tina M. Durand and Nicole A. Perez

Abstract

Parental involvement is an important component of children's school success. Although the literature on parental involvement among Latino families is growing and moving from deficit-based perspectives, very few studies have examined the parental involvement beliefs and practices of Latino families who vary across demographic and sociocultural lines within the same school community. This qualitative study explored Latino parents' beliefs about children's education, their involvement and advocacy beliefs and practices, and their perceptions of feeling welcome at their children's school. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 parents of preschool and kindergarten children who attended a bilingual school. Qualitative descriptive analyses revealed that the majority of parents espoused the cultural value of *educación,* engaged in learning activities at home, and viewed themselves as living models of behavior for children, regardless of their education or immigrant status. Only first generation immigrant parents made explicit reference to children's futures. All parents attributed supportive relationships with school personnel and a bilingual climate as the most important sources of feeling welcome at school. However, parents with more education valued what they perceived as an "open door policy" and were more vocal in critiquing policies. Findings have implications for the development of multicultural competence among teachers and for ways diverse Latino families might develop a shared voice within the school sector.

Key Words: parental involvement, parents, advocacy, Latino families, cultural beliefs, social class, school partnerships, voice, preschool, kindergarten

Introduction

Research over the past several decades has documented a positive link between parental involvement and children's school success (Domina, 2005; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2011). Although there is increasing evidence that high levels of parental involvement are associated with high levels of achievement across children's school careers (see reviews by Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007), parental involvement and advocacy may be particularly important during pivotal developmental transitions, such as the movement into preschool and kindergarten, which often constitute families' first experience with the particulars of formal schooling (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007).

As the United States continues to fulfill its destiny as a nation of immigrants, schools have attempted to incorporate the voices of diverse groups of parents in ways that support children's learning and development, as evidenced by collaborations with parent organizations such as ACORN and the National PTA (Weiss, 2008). At the federal government level, Section 1118—Parental Involvement—of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) includes a more concerted focus on the structures and processes that are needed to involve all families in their children's education, such as more comprehensive professional development for both educators and parents, concrete opportunities to involve parents both within and outside the school building, and communications with parents that are clear, timely, and in languages that all parents can understand (Epstein, 2005). Despite this, parental involvement and engagement among Latinos, the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., has often been widely misunderstood and framed within a deficit perspective that characterizes this group as "uninvolved" or "unwilling," carrying with it the implication that Latino parents do not actively invest in their children's educational outcomes (see Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Diaz Soto, 2007; López, 2001; Ramirez, 2008).

Delgado Gaitan (2004) writes at length about the inherent strengths that exist among Latino families regardless of educational, social, or economic standing, such as the salience of the family; an emphasis on respect, discipline, and proper behavior; a high value for education; and high expectations for children's academic success. Resituating Latino parental involvement within a strengths-based perspective requires that educators and practitioners become familiar with the cultural beliefs, socialization practices, and varied forms of cultural and social capital diverse groups of Latino parents activate to support

their children's learning if these professionals truly seek to forge meaningful, successful partnerships with such families. This requires examining important sources of continuity and discontinuity in the beliefs and practices that might exist across Latino families who vary across demographic and sociocultural lines. For example, how do Latino families who differ in terms of their education, income, and immigrant status talk about education for children? How do they perceive their children's earliest school experiences and their respective roles in supporting these? In this qualitative investigation, we examine the diverse ways Latino parents of preschool and kindergarten children talk about their children's education, their own involvement practices, and their perceptions of the climate of their children's schools. Ultimately, we ask the question: Are U.S. schools in the 21st century places that feel supportive and validating to all Latino parents or only some Latino parents? Indeed, parents' voices must be the primary vehicle through which we gather insights to this question.

The Latino Population, Children, and Education

As a group, the Latino population of the United States is highly diverse. Suárez-Orozco and Páez (2002) define Latinos as that segment of the U.S. population that traces its descent to the Spanish-speaking, Latin American, and Caribbean worlds. Hence, respective Latino subgroups have varied histories, worldviews, and sociopolitical and economic circumstances. Latinos are currently the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., representing 16.3% of the total population in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Within this context, educating young Latino children has been cited as an "urgent demographic imperative" (Garcia & Jensen, 2009, p. 3). Latino children are not only the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., but also the youngest and fastest growing. This growth is particularly alarming in light of recent socioeconomic trends. In 2003, Latinos comprised 21.4 % of the total population of children under 5 years old, yet they also accounted for nearly 34% of young children living in poverty in the same census (Barrueco, Lopez, & Miles, 2007).

Approximately three in four Latino children live in homes in which at least some Spanish is spoken regularly, and as such, they present with a unique linguistic profile (Garcia & Jensen, 2009). However, the schooling of Latino children has been described by Valenzuela (1999) as "subtractive" rather than empowering, characterized by decontextualized, reductionist pedagogies that serve to strip Latino children of their primary resources—their language, culture, and family resources. Indeed, in his ethnographic work with classroom teachers working with high percentages of Latino children, Ramirez (2008) found that teachers were often hesitant or resistant to learning about the cultural beliefs, values, and perspectives of Latino parents, unknowingly

perpetuating what Delpit (1995) calls an "ignorance of community norms," which can have devastating effects on home–school relationships and on children's school trajectories. Hence, for educators who serve Latino children, awareness and sensitivity to the diverse cultural norms and values of the families from which they come is tantamount to effective pedagogy.

Latino Parental Involvement

The literature on parental involvement among Latino families is complex and evolving. Historically, the parental involvement rates of Latino families in children's schools have been described as low to nonexistent, particularly when compared to those of EuroAmerican families (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Moles, 1993; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Latino parents' differential rates of involvement have often been largely attributed to discrepancies between family values and beliefs about schooling, such as family ties, honor, and immediate gratification, and those assumed to be important for school success in this country (Goldenberg, Gallimore, & Reese, 2005). Moreover, a variety of factors, such as a potential language barrier and an inability to be physically present in schools, combined with the relatively poor school attainment of Latino children, have contributed to the perception among teachers that Latino families are uninvolved and not invested in their children's education (see review by Hill & Torres, 2010).

In the last decade, however, the literature on parental involvement among Latinos has become less reliant on stereotypic notions of this diverse population in favor of more nuanced approaches to examining both continuity and discontinuity in beliefs and values between those of the home and those of the school (Goldenberg et al., 2005), while acknowledging a wider variety of ways that Latino families support their children's learning and development. Indeed, research indicates that Latino parents strongly value education and have high expectations for their children (Fuligni, 2007). Qualitative research with Latino families has challenged and stretched the parameters of traditional notions of parental involvement as a set of scripted, school-sanctioned activities to more localized, culturally relevant means of support, such as instilling the importance of education through parental discussions and modeling of hard work (López, 2001), assisting children with homework, study skills, and study time (Ramirez, 2004), daily conversation about school and scrutinizing information sent home (Carreón et al., 2005), and capitalizing on the "funds of knowledge" that are generated by daily household life and work (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This research encourages educators and schools to adopt a broader and more inclusive attitude toward the myriad ways diverse families are involved in their children's learning. As well, it legitimizes the more

"subtle" aspects of parental involvement (e.g., communication, high expectations) that have been found to be particularly salient and powerful with regard to children's outcomes in recent meta-analyses (see Jeynes, 2010).

Indeed, if the goal of education in a multicultural democracy is the empowerment and transformation of its citizens and the communities in which they live, ethnic minority parents' strong engagement and presence within the school sector is necessary and cannot be underscored enough (Fine, 1993). Hence, the only way to avoid a "one size fits all," "de-racialized" approach to parental involvement—in which the discourse, goals, and agenda are set by White, middle-class parents—is for ethnic minority parents' voices to be legitimized and heard and their collective presence to be felt within schools (Crozier, 2001). This is not without its challenges, however, due to the potential intersection of ethnicity, race, and social class with regard to parents' school involvement levels. Research on social class and parental involvement has shown that middle-class parents capitalize on higher levels of the forms of social and cultural capital recognized and valued by schools in their interactions with children's schools, positioning them to be more confident, vocal, and powerful in their involvement and advocacy efforts (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Empirical studies and interventions aimed at increasing Latino parents' sense of empowerment and participation through increasing the various forms of capital they might employ in schools is growing. For example, De Gaetano (2007) implemented a three-year project with Latino families aimed at increasing both informal (i.e., at-home support) and formal (i.e., parents' engagement at school) parental participation by increasing their knowledge and appreciation of the pervasiveness of native culture in their lives and the crucial role they held in children's learning and by increasing parents' cultural capital regarding the workings of the school through observation and dialogue. More recently, Bolívar and Chrispeels (2011) describe a 12-week parent leadership development program focusing on increasing social and intellectual capital for Latino parents, resulting in increased engagement in the school sector and the creation of several organizations by participants that continue to provide institutional and community support to families. These projects represent concrete steps toward what Fine (1993) terms "a struggle to resuscitate the public sphere of public education" (p. 683), where parents, educators, and researchers work across lines of power, class, race, and gender to transform schools into truly meaningful, culturally responsive communities.

Goals and Objectives of the Present Study

As noted by Carreón et al. (2005), an in-depth understanding of parental involvement requires an examination of the cultural beliefs and values that

underlie and motivate their actions. Although empirical studies have begun to provide a more nuanced understanding of the education and involvement beliefs and practices of Latino families, the majority have focused on Latino families who have very low income and little or no formal education. Very few studies have examined the beliefs and practices of Latino families with varying levels of education and income within the same school community, thereby precluding the opportunity to explore important continuities and discontinuities among them. Amidst such variability may be potentially exciting spaces where diverse families who possess different forms of capital might work together in complementary, yet collaborative ways for the good of their children, schools, and communities.

In this qualitative investigation, we seek to contribute to the aforementioned literature that celebrates and legitimizes the voices of Latino parents, capitalizes on their inherent strengths and strong value of education, and centers them as key figures and potential advocates in their children's earliest school experiences. Indeed, an understanding of Latino parents' involvement beliefs and practices in the earliest years of schooling might set the stage for more informed, collaborative, and fruitful partnerships with families that can support children's best outcomes as they move through the elementary grades. Toward this end, we conducted in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers of children in preschool and kindergarten at a two-way bilingual school, guided by the following questions: (1) What are parents' cultural beliefs regarding education and their parental roles? (2) What contextual factors influence their beliefs and involvement within the school setting? and (3) What are their perceptions of the school climate and environment (i.e., do they feel welcome at school)? We examine cultural and demographic sources of both continuity and variability in my analysis of their responses, providing a nuanced understanding of the nature of their cultural beliefs, the ways in which their beliefs are informed by their respective histories and sociocultural circumstances, and their potential for authentic collaborations with teachers, schools, and most notably, with each other.

Method

The School Site

The study was conducted at a public, preK–8 school that serves approximately 400 children in an urban city in the Northeast. Approximately 91% of the children enrolled are of diverse Latino origin (e.g., Puerto Rican, Dominican, South American, Central American). The school uses a two-way English/Spanish bilingual curriculum, one of only several that exist in the state. In

this model, children are taught in both Spanish and English across all subjects using a continuous progress model, whereby languages are systematically embedded throughout the curriculum, with full bilingualism as the set goal. Hence, all lead teachers and specialists and most administrators (e.g., building principal, curriculum coordinator) at the school are fully bilingual in English and Spanish.

The long-standing relationship between the school and my (i.e., the first author's) academic institution (e.g., as a site for student teachers and other faculty projects) provided the initial scaffolding for my entry into the school community. A more personal connection with the building principal was made during the academic year prior to this study when I served as faculty host to a visiting scholar who spent some of her time (accompanied by me) at this school site. Once this connection was established, all aspects of the research plan, timeline, and potential outcomes were discussed first with the school principal, then with the K1 (preschool)–K2 (kindergarten) team of lead teachers, since parents of children in these earliest grades were the focus for this investigation. There were two K1 classrooms and two K2 classrooms in the school building; each classroom had between 18–23 children, one lead teacher, and one classroom paraprofessional, respectively. Hence, parents from all four K1–K2 classrooms were the focus of this study.

Participants

Participants were 12 parents of preschool and kindergarten (10 preschool, two kindergarten) children who were enrolled full time at the school. Ten participants were women (all biological mothers), and two were men (both biological fathers); mean age of participants was 35 years. Parents were of diverse Latino origin; five reported their ethnicity as Dominican, three Puerto Rican, two Salvadorian, and two reported Latino/multiethnic. The majority of parents (i.e., 8) were born outside of the continental U.S. Among this group, four had been residing in the U.S. for 10 years or less (2, 6, 9, and 10 years, respectively), and the remaining four had been living in the U.S. for more than 10 years (12, 21, 22, and 30 years, respectively). Parents' language usage in the home with the target children was diverse: Four parents reported that they spoke Spanish most often at home with their children, four reported English, and four reported that they used both languages equally.

In terms of reported parental education and yearly household income, study participants were extremely diverse (Table 1). Four parents' highest level of education was high school, and three parents reported they had less than a high school education (one was working on her GED). However, two parents reported they had attended some college, and the remaining three parents held

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Families (*n* = 12)

	N	%	*M (SD)*
Parent relationship to child			
Mother	10	83.3	
Father	2	16.7	
Parent age			34.8 (6.5)
Parent marital status			
Married	4	33.3	
Partner/cohabitating	5	41.7	
Single	3	25.0	
Parent place of birth			
Latin America/Puerto Rico	8	66.7	
Continental U.S.	4	33.3	
Parent years living in the U.S.[a]			14.13 (9.53)
Parent reported ethnicity			
Dominican	5	41.7	
Puerto Rican	3	25.0	
Central American	2	16.7	
Latina, multiethnic	1	8.3	
Latina, unspecified	1	8.3	
Parent level of education			
No formal schooling	1	8.3	
Some high school	2	16.7	
High school diploma	4	33.3	
Some college	2	16.7	
Bachelor's	1	8.3	
Graduate	2	16.7	
Parent household income			
Less than $20,000	3	25.0	
$20-40,000	2	16.7	
$40-60,000	2	16.7	
$60-80,000	1	8.3	
$80-100,000	2	16.7	
Over $100,000	2	16.7	
Parent employment			
Full-time	8	66.7	
Part-time	1	8.3	
Unemployed	3	25.0	
Language interview conducted			
Spanish	4	33.3	
English	7	58.3	
Bilingual	1	8.3	

Note. [a] Includes only parents born outside the continental U.S.

Bachelor's degrees or higher. Three parents had extremely low annual incomes (less than $20,000), four parents reported incomes between $20,000–60,000, one parent between $60,000–80,000, and the remaining four reported incomes of above $80,000. Parental education was highly correlated with yearly household income ($r = .77$, $p < .01$). Nine parents reported they were married or cohabitating with a long-term partner; three reported they were single.

Data Collection Procedures

To establish an overall context for the research, the K1–K2 teaching team (two preschool and two kindergarten lead teachers) participated in individual, semistructured interviews with me regarding their parental involvement beliefs and practices in the months before parents were interviewed.[1] I also spent some time observing lessons and activities in teachers' classrooms. Subsequently, all four teachers disseminated a bilingual letter and consent form that described the study to all parents of children in their classrooms, respectively, inviting and encouraging them to participate. Approximately 58–60 invitations/forms were disseminated across the four classrooms. Parents who returned consent forms in the affirmative were contacted by telephone or in person before or after school to schedule interviews; hence, all parents self-selected to participate in the study. Although a total of 18 parents[2] returned consent forms indicating their desire to be interviewed, four were unable to participate due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g., illness, work situation, inability to be contacted).

In-depth interviews were conducted with parents during the spring of the children's school year (March–June, 2010). Eight interviews were conducted by me and my research assistant, a fully bilingual, native Spanish speaker. Interviews were conducted in the school building, in a quiet, private space in the library, and one interview was conducted by me at a local nearby university (the mother's place of work). Due to scheduling constraints, three interviews were conducted by me over the phone. All interviews were conducted in the parents' preferred language and were audiotaped (including the three phone interviews) and later professionally transcribed verbatim. Seven interviews were conducted in English and the remaining five were conducted in Spanish. In particular, Spanish interviews were transcribed by a professional, accredited translator who transcribed the interviews verbatim, first in Spanish, then in English, using back translation for accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes on average.

The general focus for the in-depth interviews was determined prior to data collection. Hence, interviews followed a semistructured format, with some closed (e.g., have you participated in any of the following events at school this year?) but mostly open-ended questions being asked in each interview, such as

the following: What do you think is special/you could change in your child? What do you see as some of the most important things you do in helping [child] grow up? What does it mean for a child to be educated? Do you think you should be involved in your child's learning at home? What kinds of things do you do? Are you involved with teachers and staff at school/how? Are you involved with other parents in your child's classroom/how? Do you feel welcome at school/why? What is the best/most difficult thing about the school? Parents were encouraged to answer in their own words, and the interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational manner. Throughout the interviews, we often repeated parents' answers back to them to ensure clarity and to give them the opportunity to elaborate or qualify their responses.

Participant Trust

As noted by Maxwell (1992) and Angen (2000), qualitative interviews and their resultant "texts" are not objective accounts of reality, but socially constructed entities, negotiated by both researcher and respondent, and shaped by the contexts and manner in which they take place. They are social situations that inherently involve a relationship between the interviewer and the participant (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Hence, establishing trust with participants is essential to both the success of the interview and the validity of participants' responses. Several participants were familiar with me because I had spent time in their children's classrooms in the weeks prior to the interviews. In addition, we carefully followed best practices regarding qualitative interview techniques. Specifically, my research assistant and I established and maintained rapport with the participants throughout the interview process; many times, this was "led" in Spanish by my assistant, who is Latina and also from an urban, multicultural community that was similar to that of the participants. We also engaged in "interactive" listening as discussed in Fontana and Frey (2000). Of course, the cross-sectional design of this study did not allow for the kind of trust between researcher and participant that can result from more longitudinal work. Hence, the data here must be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as engaged in research; it demands that we explore and analyze the complexities and contradictions inherent in the research process (e.g., interpretations of truth, multiple agendas, issues of power) and on the meaning we make and present from the experience (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). It is a conscious acknowledgement of being both inquirer and respondent.

While detailed notes on my observations and comments regarding the interview process were written after each respective interview, the majority of my

reflections and much of my reflexive praxis were guided by Reinharz's (1997, 2011) contention that there are multiple selves that emerge and are in fact created in the field and that these selves must be explored in terms of how they impact the conduct of research, the interactions between researcher and participant, and the interpretation and representation of the findings. In particular, I reflected often on my stance as a EuroAmerican, academic researcher—in effect, an outsider in this particular community—and how this influenced participants' responses and candor with me. Yet, notwithstanding the challenges that these aspects of self might have brought forth, I believe my interactions with parents were greatly mediated by components of my personal self that were salient here: my former position as an early childhood public school teacher who was very comfortable and skilled at engaging with parents of young children, and my position as an academic from a working-class background. This latter, seemingly contradictory position of having some understanding and direct experience with divergent worldviews and sources of knowledge that might be attributed to social class rendered me, I believe, less intimidating and more approachable to all families. As well, as researchers, our understanding of phenomena was stretched through the conduct of these interviews, which were often profoundly humbling. For example, one young mother agreed to meet with us after her long work shift, yawning throughout the entire interview. I found myself pondering the question: If agreeing to meet with researchers after a long work day to discuss education and involvement wasn't an example of commitment and support of her daughter's education, what was?

In essence, then, the practice of reflexivity in thought and writing throughout this project served neither to ensure that the data "[emerged] scientifically pure and squeaky clean" (Burman, 1997, p. 796), nor that the findings were untrustworthy and irrelevant, but served as an ongoing process through which I interrogated my own positionality, stance, and assumptions about the research topic and the ways in which aspects of myself might be perceived by the participants. This process enabled me to receive information from families in an open, accepting, and sometimes surprising way and to represent their experiences in a careful, sensitive, and informed manner.

Qualitative Approach and Analysis

Qualitative content analysis, where the intent is to describe content of a more latent—as opposed to purely manifest (e.g., frequencies of codes, means)—nature (Sandelowski, 2000), was the method utilized to examine parent interview data. Specific analysis of interview data followed the steps outlined and defined by Weber (1985) and Downe-Wamboldt (1992), focusing on target sections of the interviews. Emerging codes, defined as a segment

of text that conveyed a unified message, idea, or thought, were developed and considered in terms of their dimensions or characteristics in the process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It became apparent that while some codes were representative of the majority of parents, others varied across levels of parents' education and immigrant status. Hence, final coding of transcripts focused specifically on variations both within and across codes in terms of education and immigration status, two variables that have been shown to account for variations in mothers' childrearing and educational beliefs and practices with children, and children's education and health-related outcomes (see Laosa, 1980; LeVine, LeVine, & Schnell, 2001; Tapia Uribe, LeVine, & LeVine, 1994). Throughout the analysis process, I consulted with a multicultural peer group of qualitative researchers to ensure validity of emergent codes and themes.

Results and Discussion

Based on qualitative analyses, important continuities and discontinuities emerged in the voices of parents as they discussed education, parental involvement, their roles in supporting their children's growth and learning, and their perceptions of the school environment. Results are organized in terms of illustrative categories or themes that capture parents' diverse views on these issues. Discussion of the results is integrated throughout this section as well, in order to provide a rich synthesis of the data and my interpretations (see Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). All names of participants used throughout are pseudonyms, and dates given refer to interview dates.

Continuity: The Strong Presence of *Educación*

The centrality of the parental role in facilitating the childrearing goal of *educación* was reflected across the majority of interviews, regardless of parents' education or immigrant status. The term *educación* is a core cultural value among Latinos of all national origins, rooted within an interdependent framework (see review by Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). *Educación* is more comprehensive than its English cognate "education;" in *educación*, moral, interpersonal, and academic goals are not separated, but intimately linked (Valenzuela, 1999). In her ethnographic work with Mexican immigrant families, Valdés (1996) noted that parents often mentioned the moral education of their children when discussing education. Similarly, in a study of Mexican immigrant families by Goldenberg and Gallimore (1995), parents' definitions of education did not center exclusively on academics, but included morality, proper behavior, good manners, and respect for elders.

Eleven out of 12 parents that we spoke with reflected this more robust definition of education, with a strong focus on good behavior across contexts. For example, two mothers (one who was completing her GED and one with less than a high school diploma) commented on desired behaviors of children when asked to discuss what education meant to them:

> Just upbringing, training, because they will continue in the habits you form with them…for me, it's basic—education is training in the home as well as school. [Nelda, 5/12/10]

> Education is very important, because it's good when a child—you know—it's just a matter of politeness, when he says "thank you," when he says "excuse me," when he says he is sorry when he does something wrong. [Sophia, 5/11/10]

Similar sentiments were also expressed by more formally educated mothers, whose definitions illustrate the fusion of academic and social outcomes:

> Education…to me it means more like problem solving skills, not just academics, but social problem solving skills…because once they leave school and enter the social world with both adults and other children, teaching them about fairness and compassion...so the academics, but also like social, social skills. [Cara, 5/7/10]

> Well, I guess an educated person is someone who is well mannered and knows how to get along in the world in a cordial way…but it would also mean having the knowledge to get along in the world and make good decisions. [Lila, 4/27/10]

Overall, I noted that most parents appeared comfortable answering this question and that little or no "tension" existed between education as being either school-based or experientially based. For the majority of parents, these were mutually constituted aspects of their definitions. As well, parents' definitions of education focused on children's success not just in school, but in life, and were very future oriented. Of particular interest was that although eight out of twelve parents made reference to children's futures in their respective definitions, four parents explicitly used the word "future" in their descriptions, and each of these parents had been born outside of the U.S. As noted by Michael, who had no formal schooling in his home country of El Salvador:

> I think it's good, what they are teaching her at this school, she's learning really well—they treat her very well—in everything, her education. It's very important…just that they teach her well, for a better future. [6/11/10]

This explicit orientation to children's successful futures may well be a unique feature and inherent strength of immigrant families living in the U.S., whose expectations and aspirations for better lives for their children may be more urgent and imperative than those of native families and who immigrate with high hopes of expanding educational opportunities for their children (see Delgado Gaitan, 2004; Lansford, Deater-Deckard, & Bornstein, 2007).

Interestingly, the only parent who did not articulate traditional *educación* values in her definition of the construct was, in fact, highly educated and born in the U.S. Instead, Maria's definition of education focused on purely conceptual cognitive skills and learning outcomes, as exemplified by her words here:

> Now what it [education] means to me is that a child or an adult has the desire to explore, to open things up, to unpack things, to look at things critically, to challenge, to wear new hats…and unfortunately, I think the curriculum in most cases, not all, but in many cases it actually beats the desire to learn out of a kid, rather than reinforces this stuff. [4/28/10]

Maria's focus on education as a process-oriented activity where open-ended exploration and critical analysis is central is consistent with LeVine et al.'s (2001) ongoing work that illustrates the effect of maternal schooling on mothers' use of language with young children. Specifically, maternal schooling promotes an increase in verbal, rather than proximal, interaction and the use of a more decontextualized, abstract, academic language. In both LeVine's work and the results noted above, we see a shift from knowledge as derived from and embedded in practical, shared, everyday experiences, to a more constructivist perspective, where the construction of knowledge is a largely solo process, dependent upon the individual's cognitive readiness and sophistication in accommodating "novel" environmental inputs.

In sum, the views and definitions of education expressed here by parents across all levels of education reflect the tenacity of more traditional *educación* values on parents' cognitions and also the potential impact of formal schooling on their education- and learning-related beliefs. Indeed, the nature of ethnic minority and immigrant parents' beliefs and practices are multifaceted and complex, based on the adaptation of long-term cultural goals, values, and aspirations for children to their current contextual experiences (e.g., social interactions, work/educational experience, economic condition, location of residence) within the host culture (García Coll & Pachter, 2002; Weisner, 2005).

Continuity: Parents as "Academic Teachers," "Guides," and "Living Models"

In our conversations with parents and my analysis of transcripts, it was clear that these parents cast themselves as the most central figures in their child's lives; put another way, they considered themselves as the true purveyors of the *educación* values illustrated in the previous section. This was true for all parents, regardless of their demographic characteristics. When asked to articulate the most important aspects of their roles as parents in helping their children grow up, three major dimensions emerged: acting as "teachers" by providing support for schoolwork, functioning as "guides," and serving as living "models" of behavior. I discuss each dimension separately.

It was the case that every parent reported that they provided direct instructional support with homework and engaged in school-based activities with children that involved reading, writing, crafts, games, and counting, such as expressed here by Dana, who had attended some college:

> Sometimes when we are climbing—we live on the 5th floor, so we have to take the stairs—we count the steps, like one by one…and sometimes, when I'm cooking, I'll ask him to give me two cups, then what's half of that…I just try and tell him, like, numbers and stuff…and I read to him a lot….We have games that we play that are with letters and numbers, so I think that helps him, too. [6/17/10]

Similarly, Norma, a mother with less than a high school education, described engaging in a variety of school-based activities, noting both their frequency and their challenges:

> At the very least every day I check his backpack, and I sit with him and do his homework in the workbook, and I help him…and to read…he loves to read with me…they go to the library and get books, and I help him with that. Since he's in the youngest grades, the most difficult for me is to push him to recognize letters and read and that sort of thing. You have to have a lot of patience—he forgets everything; it's hard. [5/11/10]

In a practical sense, the finding that all parents—including those with little or no formal education—appeared comfortable supporting children's academic development might be the result of two things in particular: (1) children here are in the earliest grades of school, and their schoolwork is manageable for all parents, and (2) the fact that these children's teachers are very explicit about the activities they want parents to support at home, offering structured materials, guidelines, and hands-on trainings for parents about how to engage in early literacy activities that focus on children's oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension. During my time in the children's classrooms, I noticed the

variety of materials (e.g., books, journals, manipulatives) that were sent home with children on a regular basis. When asked about this, teachers reported to me that providing families with explicit strategies for interacting with books in ways that would reinforce what they were doing in the classroom was a primary objective of the preschool and kindergarten programs. Such practices are examples of the ways schools might involve and encourage parents who might be unfamiliar with the more "emergent" approaches to literacy instruction that are employed by many early childhood teachers in the U.S., as has been documented in other studies with immigrant Latino families (see Reese & Gallimore, 2000).

Theoretically, these findings illustrate both the changing nature of parents' beliefs and practices and the limitations of relying on stereotypical, simplistic notions of Latino parenting practices around education and schooling. Although previous, excellent qualitative work with Latino families (e.g., Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Piérola, 1995; Valdés, 1996) suggested that Latino parents often do not consider direct support of children's academic learning (i.e., shared reading, homework instruction) as part of their parental role, more recent studies (see Durand, 2010b; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Goldenberg et al., 2005) are more consistent with the findings here, which provide evidence that Latino families *do* engage in academic activities and support for schooling at home, at least in the early years, and that this support can be mediated by teachers and schools in sensitive, empowering ways.

It was the case, however, that all parents appeared most confident and were most eloquent in their descriptions of themselves as children's "guides" and living "models" of behavior. This might be expected, since cross-cultural studies reveal that, as a group, Latino parents tend to endorse and engage in higher levels of direction, modeling, rule setting, and decision making than EuroAmerican parents (see review by Halgunseth et al., 2006). For example, one mother with a high school education articulated that the most important part of her role as a mother was the day-to-day guidance—the "little things" —that she provided:

> So I just think it's the little things you have to do, you have to do the day-to-day things, and you have to let them know, and you have to show them how to do things, you can't just expect them to know—and they aren't going to learn on their own, you have to guide them—that's why they need the guidance. [Ilena, 5/10/10]

Dana elaborated on the salience of family and expanded upon the concept of guidance to refer to the exertion of "control" over children:

> I think my family played a big part in my life, the way I am today, and I want to pass that on to my kids…not that they will be just like me, but

they will have some family values…you have to guide them…to be on top of them, because, you know, look what's happening in [city] right now, many kids are getting killed and stuff…I'm not saying that's happening because their families aren't there—I'm not saying that—but I'm saying that if you know where your kids are and you know, they are like kids, and you have to have some control over them, and you try to teach them right from wrong all the time, and so then I think they will think twice before they do things. [6/17/10]

The notion of parents as guides can also be viewed within the cultural value of *familismo*, which also emerges as an important theme among U.S. Latinos, taken as a group (Harwood, Leyendecker, Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002). *Familismo* refers to family closeness, cohesion, and interdependence, an expectation and reliance on family members—including intergenerational and extended kin—as primary sources of instrumental and emotional support, and the commitment to the family over individual needs and desires (Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002; Falicov, 2005). The aforementioned quote by Dana illustrates both the primacy and potential for *familismo* values to exert a protective influence on children's growth and development.

Related to the concept of guides were parents' vivid portrayals of themselves as tangible models for children to look up to and base their actions on; put another way, parental modeling might be a way of teaching children to act in accordance with *familismo* values. Joanna's description illustrates this vividly:

I correct her when things are wrong, teach her about things that may be right or wrong, and show her the right way of things—because what you show them is what they grow up to be. [5/4/10]

Nelda, who was completing her GED, noted that education was the most important thing that she did to support her daughter, but she defined this very specifically, in terms of the living example she was setting:

The most important [thing I give as a parent] is education—and the most difficult. Look at me—she [daughter] really looks at me—I didn't study, I didn't prepare, I do the work that I have to get through it, but I have to depend on her father. So, for me, education is the inheritance you give to your children. [5/12/10]

Interestingly, although the aforementioned dimensions of the parental role were expressed by all parents, two of the most educated parents' definitions included an explicit focus on spending time and simply "being present" as integral components of their parental role. Lila and Maria, when asked about the most important tasks of parenting, responded immediately with the following:

> To be present, one must be present…to do the homework, have dinner, read books…and just sit together sometimes, I think slowing things down sometimes so you are attending to your children is, I mean listening is important—I don't think our society allows for much of that, so you have to actively embrace it…we don't do any video games at all, any of those kinds of things, they kind of cripple a kid's creativity. [Lila, 4/28/10]

> I guess spending a lot of time, time with him, just talking to him, yeah, and getting him to spend time with his brother and sister…just because doing this I get an idea of what's going on in his head, and he always has such interesting things to say. [Maria, 4/27/10]

The previous two responses also include reference to children's cognitive and language capacities, casting the child as an active agent in his/her own development, which is consistent with the more constructivist view of learning expressed earlier by these mothers, in particular. Notwithstanding this variability, however, the centrality of the parental role in helping children to learn and grow was a thread that was woven throughout the parents' narratives, over and above demographic differences among them. These differences, however, did account for several interesting sources of variability in parents' specific perceptions of the school environment, and the emergence and strength of their voices in articulating their points of view.

Discontinuity: The "Openness"of the School

In their descriptions and expressed feelings about their interactions with the school, all parents had mostly positive sentiments; in fact, they liked the school very much. However, the concept of "openness," or the school being a place that had an "open-door" policy was expressed only by three mothers—Lila, Maria, and Dana—all three college-educated. When asked about what, exactly, she liked about the school, Maria quickly noted that "I feel very welcome at school, I have never felt unwelcome there…I feel like I can just go in and hang out, and I have no reason to be there" [4/28/10]. She later notes explicitly that that the school has what she perceives to be an "open-door policy." Similarly, Lila comments on teachers contributing to a fundamental openness within the school:

> The teachers by and large are very open…they're always like "give me a second, let me finish what I'm doing here, then I'm with you," and they are, and then they are open to talk, and, um, the fact that everything is sort of open, you know, is very good. [4/27/10]

However, there was no mention of the school being "open" by any of the other parents, suggesting that a sense of openness, which seemed to be defined by these mothers in terms of an ability to move about freely within the school at unscheduled times, might be a desired attribute or quality that is more salient to parents with more education. In a practical sense, the levels of education and respective household incomes of these three mothers, which were the highest of all participants, also may account for their responses; parents with professional careers may have jobs that afford more flexible, negotiable hours, as was the case with Maria and Dana, or the financial resources/support to be a "stay-at-home" parent, as was the case with Lila. Both opportunities afford these parents' a greater ability to be physically present at school or to just "drop in" for no specific reason, unlike what may be the case for parents with limited education or income whose work often involves inflexible schedules or unpredictable hours, inhibiting their school involvement practices (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sheldon, 2002).

On a more conceptual level, more educated parents' high regard for this construct of "openness" may reflect a difference in their consciousness and perceptions of the relationship between the school and their parental roles. In her ethnographic work with both upper-middle- and low-income families, Lareau (2003) consistently found that more affluent, educated parents did not question their membership and advocacy within the school and often felt more entitled to time with children's teachers and school administrators, while less educated, working-class families considered children's school lives to be "a separate realm, and one in which [parents are] infrequent visitors" (p. 214).

Discontinuity: Parents as Advocates

Related to the concept of openness was the sense of advocacy on behalf of children and families that was expressed by only a few parents. Three parents spoke at great length about how they had either advocated strongly for certain outcomes for their child, as reflected in the words of Maria, "I fought hard to get them transferred here" [4/28/10], and Lila, "I think particularly in social situations [child] had a few social issues at the beginning, and I felt that my job was to sort of alert the teachers about what the situation was and to have them pay attention" [4/27/10], or had strong feelings that more support and organizing was needed for preschool and kindergarten parents. Each of these mothers had been born in the U.S., and although Maria and Lila were college-educated, as noted previously, Ilena had only a high school education, yet spoke most eloquently about how the parents of the youngest children in a preK–8 school had a unique set of circumstances:

I speak to other parents in the morning when I see them, but I just wish there was like more involvement within the family and that maybe, that the preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classes could work together, even if it's meeting in the library at 7:30 in the morning and coming up with ideas or events or anything…like a parent council just for K1 and K2 parents…it's just different issues we have with the youngest that may not make it up there, but these concerns could be put together, emailed up to [principal's] space…I know parents are busy, but they could open an email up, they can do it from home, or we could even do phone calls. [5/10/10]

However, no other parents that we interviewed made any mention of attempts (or plans) to articulate certain practices or policies for children and families to anyone within the school community. To a large extent, the nature of these parents' early relations with schools is consistent with the aforementioned literature that notes both ethnic and class-based differences in parents' school involvement practices and advocacy, which suggest that the tendency for parents to question teachers about their practices, ask for clarification, or advocate for certain issues is a practice more commonly seen among White, upper-SES, formally educated parents, who draw upon higher levels of financial, social, and cultural capital when interacting with schools. In the case of Ilena, although she may not draw upon a particularly high level of financial or educational capital, her particular work experience undoubtedly afforded her significant social and cultural capital: she was employed as a secretary in the central office of the school system and had attended the school system herself, rendering her more familiar with the overall landscape and culture of the school and the school district as a whole and more likely to receive critical information and resources from school personnel. Hence, she may have been more confident in voicing her concerns and ideas to me and in her ability to carry them out.

Discontinuity: Confusion vs. Complaints

When asked to comment on the kinds of things children were doing in school or various school policies, some differences emerged in terms of the content of parents' responses. Two parents, both with little or no college education, expressed surprise or confusion about the kinds of things their children were expected to do in school, as illustrated by Ernesto regarding the curriculum and expectations of his son's teacher:

Yes, I am very [surprised]—he has to learn a lot, a lot of things, just so much…it's hard for him, but he does have more confidence now. [5/17/10]

Joanna, who had only been residing in the U.S. for 6 years but had taken some college courses in the Dominican Republic, expressed confusion about some of her daughter's materials, but with much reluctance and hesitancy:

…the math book, sometimes I think that maybe they, I don't know, it's too little, I don't know if that's the way, that it's right, it's not hard, but… it's not that I don't like it, I don't know. [5/4/10]

In contrast, those parents who were college-educated had more to say in the way of critique regarding aspects of the school curriculum or specific policies, as noted by Cara, who had a Master's degree:

I taught K1, so I'm kind of familiar with [the curriculum], so I wasn't surprised. So I knew what to expect, but that doesn't mean I agree. I think it's very academically based; I think kids need more time to explore and to, and to just free play. There are often times where he [child] says to me that he's expected to sit quietly all day, yeah, even at lunch…so I think they need a little more time to be 5-year-olds—it's too rigid, you know? They need time at school to free play and use their imagination and not such structured activities. [5/7/10]

Interestingly, five parents—almost half of the sample—expressed either no strong opinion on the schools' expectations for children (e.g., "no, I don't have any complaints," "I'm not surprised with anything") or responded with only positive comments. These five parents all had less than a high school education, and all but one had been living in the U.S. for less than 12 years. This positive sentiment was clearly expressed by Nelda, who was in the process of completing her GED and had only been living in the U.S. for two years:

I'm very pleased with the school, overall. My older daughter didn't read or write [in the Dominican Republic] until she was ten. Nothing. And she learned to read and write here, this year. [5/12/10]

Nelda's positive response contains an expressed comparison between her children's current educational experiences and the ones they had in her native country. Indeed, the educational beliefs and attitudes of foreign-born parents are shaped by their particular experiences with formal schooling in their countries of origin (Fuligni & Fuligni, 2007).

In her ethnographic work with both upper-middle- and low-income families, Lareau (2003) noted that low-income parents were hesitant to discuss or voice concerns regarding school-related issues because of feelings of insecurity and inferiority with school personnel and curricula and because of their own negative experiences with school. With specific regard to Latino families, Delgado Gaitan (2004) notes that parent involvement and advocacy in the school may often be compromised by language issues but is often more nuanced than

this; many Latinos' experiences with schools in the United States have been ones of estrangement, conflict, and inequity. Since immigrant Latino parents see schooling as the only possible vehicle for their children's futures, they may view the costs of raising concerns as simply too great. These observations may help to explain the overall satisfaction and lack of discontent with children's early school experiences that was reported by many parents in the present study. As well, the high percentage of Latino children and families in the school may have added to parents' overall feelings of contentment.

Notwithstanding this, it may be accurate to say from these data that parents' voices tend to become stronger and more frequently utilized as a function of the parents' education and years living in the U.S. Even if this is the case, however, schools often remain challenged to consider parents' unique perspectives. Fine (1993), recasting parental involvement as parental empowerment, noted that parents are often not seen as being "entitled" to strong voices within the school sector, thereby removing the opportunity to work collaboratively with educators and with each other in creating a vibrant, responsive school community. Immigrant parents, in particular, often find that their beliefs and actions have less power than those of other school actors, due to limited familiarity with English, less access and opportunity to form social networks, and the activation of different forms of cultural capital (e.g., life experiences; Carreón et al., 2005).

In the final section, I explore what might be considered both a necessary precursor and first step in forming authentic collaborations between schools and Latino families: parents' sense of whether or not they feel welcome in the school environment. Indeed, only within a context of belonging and trust will parents from diverse sociocultural locations come together to raise their voices, ideas, and concerns, creating the potential for collective change and advocacy.

Schools Where People Come Together: Parents' Sense of Belonging

Amidst the differences in parents' views regarding the expectations of the school and their advocacy beliefs and practices were factors that were consistently reported by nearly all of the parents as contributing to their feelings of belonging and feeling welcome at school. We asked parents directly whether they felt welcome at school and whether school felt like it was a place where families belonged and to comment on why this was so. Eleven of 12 parents answered in the affirmative immediately, many actually evidencing what appeared to be surprise at the question (the parent who was hesitant to respond in the affirmative had an issue with the before-school supervision of her preschooler and noted that it influenced her feeling welcome within the school). The most commonly cited (10 out of 12 respondents) reason for their positive

responses focused on attitudes among the teachers, administrators, and staff and the relationships that parents felt that they had with them. Parents perceived teachers as being friendly, outgoing, supportive, and generous in taking the time to provide them with assistance or answer questions. Illustrative is Norma's comment:

> I feel very welcome, always. For one thing, the attention they give. The teachers are always in a good mood, and whoever's working in the front office always has a smile, and when you have a question, they at least listen to you. [5/11/10]

Building on this, Ernesto's response also alludes to the willingness of teachers to openly acknowledge parents, yet also suggests that teachers and school personnel contribute positively to the overall school climate:

> Yes! I feel always welcome. The energy, confidence here—they [teachers and staff] welcome you with an open hand, with no regrets…it's like a happy school. They welcome you…and the joy! All the activities—there are like so many activities they welcome you to, plays and everything. It's just a happy school. [5/17/10]

Although most descriptions centered on the parent as the "recipient" of teachers' welcoming attitudes and outreach practices, three parents noted that they felt welcome at school because of teachers' attitudes toward their children. For example, Michael answered he felt like he was welcome at school because:

> They treat my daughter well. I think the teacher that I met was really good. She's teaching her well, and they are educating her very nicely. [Is there something you think they could do more of?] They are good to my daughter, everything's good. The teacher is good, very happy, and they take care of her. [6/11/10]

Clearly, then, people and relationships were integral components of parents' feelings about whether they felt welcomed and like they belonged in the school community. Although the centrality of positive relationships may well be a universally critical component to successful home–school connections for all ethnic and cultural groups, this may hold particular salience for Latino families, who have a greater tendency than do EuroAmerican families to adhere to childrearing beliefs and values which are consonant with a more sociocentric perspective, which emphasizes the fundamental connectedness of humans to one another (Harwood et al., 2002). As in other empirical work with Latino families (e.g., Ceballo, 2004; Delgado Gaitan, 1994, 2004; Durand, 2011), we see a strong emphasis on relationships with significant others—family members, teachers, and adult mentors—as central to the educational endeavor.

The second most commonly noted factor that accounted for parents' feelings of belonging within the school were what I refer to here as components of culture, most notably, the fact that the school was a truly bilingual community. While the majority of parents made some reference to the bilingual atmosphere at some point during the interview, seven of the twelve noted that it was, in fact, what they valued most about the school and what they liked the best about being there. Ilena spoke at length about her excitement about her daughter's recent enrollment in the school, focusing on her child's rapidly emerging fluency in Spanish:

> When I brought my daughter into this school we were very excited, and within two weeks she started speaking in Spanish, little words…and it was just amazing. I have a tendency to go from Spanish to English and English to Spanish, and she follows me…she'll just be like "mom, Spanish," or "mom, English," or "today mom we were in English/Spanish"…I just think that aspect is unbelievable, I just think that, I wish almost every school had that opportunity with languages for kids, and for the families. [5/10/11]

Since language significantly mediates our experience and understanding of the world (Vygostky, 1986) and is a critical dimension of one's cultural identity, it is not surprising that the majority of parents made reference to the bilingual curriculum in their descriptions of what was positive and noteworthy about the school. Maria, in particular, passionately articulated the powerful role that bilingualism has played in affirming the cultural and linguistic heritages of Latino children and families at the school:

> It's distinctive, you know. I think the two-way immersion changes the absolute feel of the school for the better. I think what the [school] does that other schools strive to do but can't is truly give the kids the message that we value where you come from, and we value what you bring to the table…like in a Sheltered English immersion school I know, you are not building on anything that they know, so let's erase who you are, because we don't actually value you. I believe it's really profound, it's saying to the kids and the families—we value this, and we value you as people. [4/28/10]

It is important to note that although Maria's words are striking, she was the only parent to comment explicitly on the link between language and cultural heritage. Interestingly, Maria was also the only parent to mention other components of culture as contributing to her positive feelings within the school:

> I just like the way I feel, just the way it feels when you go in—there are definitely differences in the Latino dominant community vs. a White-

dominated community, one of them being if you walk into the office there, you might see a whole bunch of people hanging around eating rice and beans; you are never going to see that at some of the other schools. The way people touch and hold your kids…I like that emphasis. [4/28/10]

Maria's status as a doctoral candidate may well have influenced her ability and willingness to articulate the relations between culture, school climate, and ethnic (Latino) identity. Even so, I was initially surprised that only one parent mentioned other "tangible" aspects of Latino culture besides language. However, such results might be interpreted with regard to the inherent power structure that exists within schools and within the U.S. in general; Latino families expect schools to be (and they often are) largely EuroAmerican, White institutions, and parents may not be inclined or empowered to challenge this (de la Piedra, Munter, & Girón, 2006; Carreón et al., 2005; Ramirez, 2003). However, if schools—especially those that are embedded in multicultural communities—are truly to be environments that validate children's and their families' diverse cultural heritages, educational professionals must be open and willing to stand in solidarity with Latino and other ethnically diverse families and to utilize the additional sources of cultural capital they possess. Indeed, such families can serve as vital resources for the entire school community.

Conclusion

Examining the continuities and discontinuities in the perspectives of Latino parents with different educational and sociocultural circumstances can inform the development of multicultural competence among teachers and schools and can provide insights into the ways that diverse families might develop a shared voice within the school sector. First, the fact that Latino families across the demographic spectrum highly value education should be encouraging for schools and teachers and help to diminish the perception that Latino families are not invested in children's schooling. As well, being knowledgeable about cultural values such as *educación* and *familismo* among Latino families can help educators to build on children's home cultures and experiences and to interpret parents' actions with a more informed, less value-laden point of view, thereby serving them more effectively. Although cultural knowledge does not render us able to accurately predict the behavior of individuals, it does contribute to "a certain mindset…a certain process of sensitivity that becomes automatic" (Durand, 2010a, p. 837) when interacting with diverse families. This mindset is a critical component to forming mutually rewarding home–school partnerships between ethnically diverse families and schools.

The fact that relationships emerged as the most significant contributor to parents' sense of feeling welcome at school in this study further validates the need for cultural competence among educators. This is critical and is consistent with Mapp's (2003) work that suggests that although programmatic aspects of family involvement initiatives taken by schools (e.g., Open House) are important, establishing meaningful relationships between parents and school staff are of particular import in influencing parents' desire to be involved. These relationships must build on culture and language, however; when Latino parents' cultures are focused on in authentic, respectful ways, they are more likely to be substantively engaged in schools (Diaz Soto, 2007). Insights from Latino parents are integral to this process, but they often may not trust themselves as "experts" due to their historically marginalized position in U.S. schools. As shown by De Gaetano (2007) in her ethnographic work with Latino families (and perhaps seen in the present study), the primacy of language and culture in the learning process is often not self-evident but can be increasingly recognized and valued by families when they are given the opportunity to engage in authentic dialogue and reflection on their experiences together. Put simply, families in De Gaetano's study became more empowered and involved as their cultural awareness increased.

Lastly, what are the potential spaces where parents' diverse voices might come together? Despite the "tensions" that may exist in the discrepancies between high- and low-educated and/or immigrant and nonimmigrant parents' perceptions of the school, advocacy efforts, and practical realities (i.e., that constrain their ability to be involved), I suggest here that parents can work together in complementary ways to create shared outcomes and a common vision for the schools that serve their children. When different parents take the lead and utilize their particular resources and connections to reach out to each other, safe spaces might be created where diverse parents can offer their perspectives and ideas in different ways and in different contexts. For example, although parents with less education and experience in U.S. schools may not feel comfortable attending a large group meeting in the school library, they may appreciate an opportunity to talk informally about their particular experiences with a few parents at a local park. In turn, their contributions might be brought to the larger parent group. In order to ensure that the interests of one group do not become dominant, parents must be willing to reach out and connect across sociocultural lines, however, rather than simply engaging those individuals who share similar educational backgrounds or live in the same neighborhood, for example.

As noted by Cucchiara and Horvat (2009), it may in fact be the case that more educated parents in the middle class may often take on leading and particularly agentic roles in advocating for change within schools. However, in

their work on middle-class parental involvement in two urban public schools, Cucchiara and Horvat (2009) found that when middle-class parental involvement was not exclusively individualistically driven but included a focus on the entire school community and on securing resources and advantages for all children and families, change was more sustainable and more widely felt. Hence, although it may be the case that certain parents may be on the "front lines" in their involvement and communication with school personnel, their efforts, which obviously will include their own children's best interests, must work toward a shared vision and a collective voice that is representative of all parents. Indeed, as the Latino presence in the U.S. continues to grow, the time has come for schools to really listen to Latino families and for Latino families to really listen to each other as they work together to create vibrant schools that educate and empower children, celebrate children's cultural heritages, and serve as sites of change within communities.

Endnotes

[1] Results of these teacher interviews are not included here, as they are not the explicit focus of the present investigation.

[2] Two of these families identified as EuroAmerican/Caucasian. Although they did participate in interviews, only the transcripts of the 12 parents who identified as Latino were selected for the present investigation.

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A Mother's Humiliation: School Organizational Violence Toward Latina Mothers

Lilia D. Monzó

Abstract

This paper examines how Latina mothers experience violence in schools through everyday interactions with those positioned with greater power in our society. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the article discusses how deficit perspectives held toward Latina mothers and the privileging of White, middle-class frames result in symbolic violence. Some of the consequences that these episodes of violence produce for Latina mothers personally and for their participation in schooling are revealed. A caring encounter is presented as a contrast to show that some educators do come to their interactions with Latina mothers prepared to listen and learn from their diverse ways of doing. This article suggests an ideological stance that must be present for caring encounters to take place and some implications for teacher and administrative credentialing programs.

Key Words: Latino, Latina, mothers, home–school relationships, symbolic violence, Bourdieu, parent involvement, caring, school staff, deficit views

Introduction

The literature on parent involvement clearly documents the chasm that exists between school personnel and parents in low-income communities of color and specifically in Latino immigrant communities (López, 2001; Valdés, 1996). Though schools may espouse a goal of more equitable relationships with

families in such communities, the persistence of entrenched deficit perspectives toward Latino communities (Volk & Long, 2005) and a "White frame" perspective on schooling work to virtually ensure that such a goal will not be met (Feagin, 2010). "Parent involvement" itself is conceptualized from the dominant culture perspective as entailing specific parental activities, attitudes, and dispositions toward schools (López, 2001). As in other "fields" of interaction in which relations of power are enacted, the actors—teachers, administrators, and parents—are implicitly expected by those with more power to take on particular roles. These roles tend to reflect the broader relations of power in the society as a whole (Bourdieu, 1991).

Latina mothers in the U.S. occupy spaces within school contexts that define them, not only as parents without the professional status of school personnel, but also as racial and linguistic minority women, commonly perceived as "passive, feeble, unintelligent, and dependant," (Gulman, Reiss, & Zudkawich, 2007, para. 6). With this perception in mind, they are typically assumed to have little knowledge about education and child development issues. Further, the community-specific cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and resources) that allows them to survive and sometimes thrive (Moll & Greenburg, 1990) within a hostile and racist society remains unrecognized, and they are often stereotyped as powerless and subsequently silenced or dismissed (Salas, 2004; Shannon, 1996).

As a former teacher and now an ethnographer studying Latina/o communities and their schools, I was aware of the ways in which Latina mothers are positioned and often mistreated in schools (see Monzó, 2005). Positionality refers to one's social placement within the hierarchical structure of our society. Latina mothers, due to racism, sexism, and classism, are often placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and treated accordingly. Having recently joined the ranks of other Latina mothers (my son is now school-age), I am now more acutely aware of this positionality and, more importantly, have *felt* its effects at a physical, psychological, and emotional level. Thus, I have come to recognize it as a form of institutionalized violence—a nonphysical form of violence that is normalized and even rewarded through current accountability systems and that leaves Latina mothers feeling violated, manifested through fear, guilt, and excessive self-monitoring.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence and Nel Noddings' (1984) concept of caring, I develop an argument about the sociocultural and historical nature of institutionalized violence in schools and, specifically, toward communities of color (read: mothers, as we are the face of the community in schools), focusing on leadership as a construct that serves to legitimize institutional violence. I share several "episodes of violence" that I have been

privy to either through personal experience or through research with Latina mothers. I share our stories of humiliation and lay bare our instinctual fear in the moment of face-to-face interaction with an oppressive institution whose ever-present ideologies reveal an entrenched racism in the act of discounting the cultural practices and values of the communities they are meant to "serve."

My goal in this paper is to lend credence to the many Latina mothers' voices that get discounted through demeaning labels: "submissive," "nonassertive," "undereducated," that suggest difficulties with the system are a function of *OUR* failure to advocate for our children. Inherent in this goal is to challenge deficit theorizing (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 1993) and to encourage school personnel—administrators and teachers—to think and ask before making assumptions about families that they have little knowledge about, to take the time to listen to what we are saying, and to be flexible in their recommendations. Inherent, as well, in this goal is a plea for reflection—the idea that perhaps Latina mothers have different worldviews and, thus, think differently than the dominant group regarding what is the best education for their children—and that school personnel make an honest attempt at caring (Noddings, 1984).

Institutionalized Violence: Symbolic Violence in Our Schools

Although as an educator of future teachers I have a strong conviction that schools and education *can* become an important vehicle for equity, it is also clear to me that many current education policies and practices sustain and may further increase inequities (Fusarelli, 2004). It can be strongly argued that, from inception, schooling has served to "fix" the "problems" of diverse peoples in order to maintain the intellectual and cultural superiority of the dominant group (Feagin, 2010). That some people of color, women, and other marginalized groups will succeed in the system is what legitimizes the institution of schooling as a viable path for social and economic mobility and sustains the metanarrative that anyone who "possesses" sufficient intellect and motivation can succeed (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

However, these structural constraints are dependent on people's willingness to accept the dominant discourses that embed a state of "naturalness" and "invisibility" to the hierarchy. Theoretically speaking, when these discourses are interrogated and systems of oppression brought to light, a ripple effect of counterhegemonic action (action that challenges existing oppressive structures) *can* take place (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2001).

Part of interrogating these discourses is deconstructing common everyday practices and beliefs that underlie our education system and that are enacted

unconsciously until these practices are examined through an "other" cultural lens and made "strange" (Spindler, 1982). Violence (in varying forms) has been socioculturally and historically situated within our education system from inception to the present. Our education system and educators (often with good intentions) have used violence to manage children's behaviors, eradicate indigenous languages and cultural practices, impose religious activity, and indoctrinate young people to what is determined by the state (and those whose interests it serves) to be worthy and/or needed in society (Reyhner, 1993). Indeed, the control of bodies is consistently applied in schools as children are expected to seek permission to speak or move around the classroom. In this process of "classroom management," many aspects of natural behavior are unnecessarily restricted (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). While some of this physical control may be necessary to ensure access to learning, it is important to understand that expectations of "appropriate" behaviors and those conducive to learning are socioculturally and historically developed rather than natural. Not surprisingly, then, students of color are believed to behave "inappropriately" in the classroom due to having discourse styles and/or kinesthetic behaviors that differ from those of White, middle-class students (Au & Kawakami, 1994). In addition, many minority students often receive excessive consequences for breaking rules (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000).

More common in U.S. schools recently is what has been termed by Pierre Bourdieu (1991) symbolic violence, or the imposition of power manifested through policy and practice that sustain existing power relations based on arbitrary factors (race, class, and gender) that are seen as "natural." According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is objectified as physical objects, such as diplomas that exemplify cultural capital, and evidenced in a person's "habitus." The habitus refers to an individual's schemas, perceptions, preferences, and ways of interacting within a particular "field." A person is socialized into a particular habitus that is highly dependent on class, race, culture, and other social categories that define our opportunities in society.

A field involves a context where social relations get played out through different positionalities (Bourdieu, 1991). The extent to which an individual player is adept at performing the habitus associated with her or his particular social role, the more that positionality (and the power associated with it) will become invisible, seen as an "inalienable right" of the individual and her or his role. For Latina immigrant mothers, their habitus may be embedded with an unconscious acceptance of a lack of power and rights (Monzó, 2009b). However, such habitus may be resisted once the person becomes aware of its unfair limitations (Scott, 1990).

In schools, symbolic violence is enacted most commonly on children by school personnel who are adults and is legitimized through the idea that adults,

and teachers or educators specifically, know what is best for children. Adults have both the physical and social power to enact violence on children with little expectation of retaliation from those children. Parent retaliation against such violence is often determined by their level of cultural capital and economic means for bringing the law to bear on the education system.

Critical race theory posits race as a category of difference used to justify the unequal relations of power that sustain a capitalist economy but also one that exists outside of class relations and interacts with class (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Race plays a central role in all our interactions, both individual and institutional. From this perspective, symbolic violence toward Latina mothers is part and parcel of broader institutionalized ideologies about Latina mothers, *because* of our race and how we are socially defined.

It is important to note here that race is a social construction developed historically as a means by which to divide and sort people into categories that would sustain power among a few (Feagin, 2010). Latinos are conceived as a mixture of races and categorized, more specifically, as an ethnicity. However, I contend that people in the United States experience their worlds as racialized beings. Being Latino is considered a social identity that is parallel to that of being Black and Asian. Furthermore, all of these social identities are defined similarly as "minority" (regardless of the numbers they may represent in a given context) in comparison to the dominant group, Whites. I recognize that Latinas are a very diverse group, representing different countries of origin, class, English proficiency, and time in the United States. An important distinction is that there may be significant cultural and linguistic differences between those Latinas who identify as immigrant and those whose families' have been here for generations. Nonetheless, stereotypes of Latinas exist because there is a general lack of recognition about these differences and most are, at least initially, taken to represent the stereotype of the poor, non-English-speaking immigrant.

The school in most Latino communities is a field in which different relations of power exist among the various parties that interact. The typical administrator, White from a middle-class upbringing, brings objectified forms of capital to her or his interactions with those who have less power. These objectified forms of capital are used as symbolic violence to hold power over and sustain unequal relations of power within the school context and within the broader society. The principal, for example, conceived in our society as the leader within the school context, holds power over other positions within the field. This power is evidenced through "the principal's office," the place where the principal wields the greatest power, further evidenced through the displaying of her or his diplomas that legitimize her/his power and serves (intentionally or not) to intimidate those who do not hold equivalent degrees or knowledge

in education, specifically. Further, a White, middle-class principal is at "home" in a leadership position within a Latino community as the broader society's racial stratification is replicated in this context and the "naturalness" of her/his positioning rarely gets interrogated. Typically, the principal's power and all-knowing stance with respect to children and education go unchallenged, and the principal is able to dictate, sermonize, demand, expect, and detail the procedures to be followed for whatever the particular situation demands. Latina parents are positioned as limited in English, undereducated, lacking knowledge of the education system, not knowing their rights, and lacking the economic, cultural, and social capital necessary to complain or make demands of the school system or anyone working within it, especially the principal or other administrative figures.

While those who have studied authority and leadership in organizations point to some leaders adopting the "charismatic" leader role in order to yield the greatest power (Robinson & Kerr, 2009), it seems that the episodes of violence detailed below suggest that in minority communities this may not even be seen as necessary, given the powerlessness with which Latina mothers are stereotyped in our society (O'Brien, 2011). Instead, these episodes show disrespect and dismissal among administrative personnel toward Latina mothers and little regard for how these episodes may be interpreted by the mothers. The risk of retaliation is considered minimal, and the symbolic violence is enacted without evidence of concern for the effect on the mother, although, perhaps, with a belief that their particular demand is the "best" thing for the children.

Home-School Relations in Latino Communities

The assumption, perhaps subconscious, that Latina mothers are unlikely to make demands on schools becomes evident when we examine the literature on home–school relations in Latino communities. This body of research has documented that Latino parents often feel unwelcome in schools and that the cultural understandings and expectations they bring to bear on their interactions within school spaces clash with those expected among school personnel in the United States (Valdés, 1996). This often results in school personnel interacting with Latino parents from a deficit perspective (Volk & Long, 2005), assuming Latino parents do not care about their children's education (Valdés, 1996, 1998). For example, based on an ethnographic study of "Garden School" where a large Latino immigrant population had rapidly replaced a predominantly White and middle-class community, Valdés (1998) writes,

> According to one teacher at the school who worked closely with the Latino community, teachers at Garden could predict few of the problems

their new students would encounter. Most knew little about poverty. They had little notion of why working parents might not be able to make midday appointments with their children's teachers. They suspected disinterest, apathy, and even antagonism and were baffled and troubled by the failure of these parents to "care" about their children. (p. 5)

Another study (Salas, 2004) found that Mexican immigrant mothers were disrespected and ultimately silenced by the ways in which school personnel interacted with them at IEP meetings. The examples provided by Salas indicate a lack of responsiveness to the mothers' language needs and to the realities of their lives and led to mothers feeling awkward in the school context and opting to remain silent. Similarly, in another study of mothers of adolescents with disabilities, the Latina mothers experienced similar dismissal and silencing in their attempts to advocate for their children within schools and other social service agencies (Shapiro, Monzó, Rueda, Gomez, & Blacher, 2004).

Some studies have documented that Latino parents are often misinformed or minimally informed about language placement options, their children's academic performance, and other school matters (Monzó, 2005; Valdés, 1996). For example, elsewhere I have documented how Latino parents' legal right to "choose" bilingual education for their children was thwarted by school leaders who deceptively placed students in bilingual programs in the same classes with English immersion students and told the teacher to "just teach in English" (Monzó, 2005).

Unfortunately, many educators know little about the lives of Latino immigrant families, resulting in perceptions of either uncaring or uninvolved Latino parents. However, studies have shown that Latino parents find multiple ways to support their children's education by fostering a strong value for academic success. Specifically, they offer *consejos* (advice) that foster academic aspirations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994), share personal narratives of their own struggles that underline their strength, courage, perseverance, and resourcefulness (Delgado-Gaitan, 2005), and dream with their children about their lives as professionals (Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

Some studies have also shown that Latino parents can and do mobilize to support each other and their children with schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, 2005). The work by Delgado-Gaitan (2001) in Carpinteria, California showed that when Latino parents mobilized to make demands on the educational system and garner support from school personnel, they were successful in getting the educational system to respond to their demands, including with respect to providing bilingual education programs. Also, research on "funds of knowledge" has shown that Latino families participate in networks of exchange that offer a wealth of knowledge and resources that can aid in children's learning of content and of English (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

These ethnographic studies (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, 2005; Salas, 2004; Valdéz, 1996) have brought to light the very real pain, fears, and hopes that Latina mothers experience related to their own and their children's schooling. They have also provided a more contextualized view of the multiple and interrelated barriers that many Latina mothers face in supporting their children's academic success, including keeping multiple jobs to make ends meet, learning English with little time or strong academic basis in their own primary language, and understanding the culture of U.S. schooling (Monzó, 2009a; Valdés, 1996, 1998).

Fortunately, some educators have begun to interact with students and parents through a "humanizing pedagogy" that involves dialogue, drawing on community resources, and having high academic expectations (Huerta, 2011). An exciting example of this can be found in the Bridging Cultures project that helped teacher–researchers gain a deep understanding of individualistic and collectivist value systems (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). While cautioning against stereotyping, the authors show that teachers' new understanding of these differences resulted in teacher–parent interactions that reflected a deep appreciation for the role Latino parents can play in their children's education, for their preferred ways of interacting, and for the specific challenges and affordances of families. Specifically, the authors documented group parent–teacher conferences that promoted dialogue between parents and teacher, greater informal interactions with parents around issues beyond academics that underlie an interest in the whole family, and finding flexible solutions for interacting with parents whose children are bussed into the school outside of their communities (Trumbull et al., 2001).

Auerbach (2009) has documented how four school leaders with a social justice commitment developed programs and activities within their schools to actively engage Latino families. What was evident among all of these principals was a strong belief in the strengths of Latino families, actively and personally drawing on the parents' resources, and being responsive to their interests and needs for the betterment of not only their children's education but also of the community. They saw schools as playing the role of serving communities. Activities that these principals developed included a yearly colloquium for parents that addressed the broader sociopolitical factors impacting Latino communities; a "Parents as Authors" program; house meetings in classrooms where teacher and parents share personal stories of their lives related to education; and home visits geared toward helping teachers to better understand the realities of their students' lives and accommodate to their needs.

Methods

The data that informs this paper is drawn from two ethnographic studies and an autoethnography that examined the experiences of Latino immigrant families with schools. The two ethnographic studies (Monzó, 2009a; Monzó & Rueda, 2001) had similar approaches to data collection. Across the two studies, I visited a total of 10 families in their homes and accompanied them on community outings (including school functions) to explore children's language, literacy, and other cultural productions. Approximately 250 home and community *visitas* were held with these families, ranging between 10 visits and 50 visits each. Focal children in each family were followed at their respective schools. Formal (audiotaped) and informal conversations often dealt with the families' interactions with school personnel, their knowledge of school practices and policies, and their understandings of school language programs, afterschool programs, and course selections. Thematic protocols were used for formal interviews, but these were conducted as open-ended and reciprocal conversations that allowed maximum input from participants to share what was meaningful to each of them. They often asked me for information about school matters and to accompany them to parent–teacher conferences, meetings with the principal, and other school functions.

The autoethnography stemmed from a research project with a colleague in which we examined our racialized experiences as women of color (Monzó & Soohoo, 2011). Over snacks and lunch in our homes and at our favorite restaurants, we enjoyed six days of dialoguing (3–5 hours each) about our past experiences as racial and linguistic minority women. We also exchanged a series of letters (20) to each other in which we shared painful incidents and reflected on our feelings and on the broader social implications of these experiences. We analyzed current events around issues of race and deconstructed the meanings.

An important outcome of this work was the recollection of my own painful memories and the realization that I held a deep sense of rage and desire to make the world see Latinos through counterframes. I immigrated at the age of four from Cuba and was raised in Miami, Florida until the age of 14 when my family moved to Los Angeles where we experienced a different sociopolitical reality. Los Angeles reflected the broader society's deficit perspective toward Latinos, and the Spanish language—which my parents had made sure I did not lose—was not valued. I have lived and/or worked in California with Latino immigrant communities, especially Mexican and Central American communities, for the past 30 years. My professional trajectory has involved working as a Spanish bilingual paraprofessional, a bilingual teacher, and currently preparing future teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Let me clarify that rage, from my perspective, is not a destructive sentiment toward any one individual or the dominant group, but rather it is a deep sense of injustice at structural inequalities. Such rage can become a source of strength toward collective personal and systemic change with others of *all* colors who have a deep desire for social justice. Subsequent to the project with my colleague, and perhaps after being sensitized to looking at my own racialized experiences, I began to systematically document the racial microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) I was experiencing at my son's school. I also documented my memories of past schooling encounters, searching for both painful *and* positive memories of dealings with schools.

The data from these studies was systematically analyzed for episodes of violence and caring encounters with school personnel. A grounded approach via line-by-line and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was utilized to make sense of the embedded meanings behind the episodes found in the data and the ways mothers described and reacted to these encounters.

Episodes of Violence Toward Latina Mothers

In this section, I detail three of the many episodes of violence enacted toward Latina mothers that I have either been privy to, experienced, or heard about through mothers' stories about their experiences with schools. Each episode is titled through the Latina counterframe in which race and ethnicity become a central category that demarks these episodes. I do this in order to reveal the perception of the Latina mothers who argue that these episodes would likely look different if they were enacted toward White and middle-class mothers. An important note is that although I focus on Latina mothers in this paper, the literature discussed above suggests that episodes of violence may be as likely to occur with other linguistic minority mothers and other mothers of color. Because symbolic violence is about power inequities, it is likely evidenced largely among nondominant groups. However, this does not preclude that at individual levels, White women and even White, middle-class men may at times have similar experiences. (Note: All names used are pseudonyms.)

Rolling the Eyes at a Mother's Vulnerability Is Acceptable…*If She Is Latina*

Sra. Ruiz shared with me that she felt betrayed by the Latina school office clerk to whom she had confided the difficulties she was having bringing her child to school. The mother had recently had to leave the child overnight with his father, and since then he had not wanted to be separated from his mother. Sra. Ruiz explained that when she walked to the classroom to drop off her

child, she had to try to pry her child's arms from around her to get him into his classroom. This happened repeatedly, and no one at the school offered support during these times. Not long after this, Sra. Ruiz had a meeting with the principal; the office clerk was present and used the information Sra.Ruiz had trustingly shared with her to suggest that Sra. Ruiz did not bring her child to school because the child did not wish to attend. After some time had passed, Sra. Ruiz shared her feeling of betrayal over this incident with the office clerk and the principal. I observed that while she was explaining her voice broke, and her eyes became watery. The principal's reaction was to roll her eyes at Sra. Ruiz's emotional response.

Here, the violence is in the principal's presumption of superiority toward the Latina mother enacted through the roll of the eyes. This act, in our society, is usually considered offensive and dismissive. It suggests that the principal interpreted the Latina mother's emotional response as either inauthentic or an overreaction. Both of these reactions are commonly exemplified in dominant group responses toward people of color as "too sensitive" or "playing the race card" whenever they point out that they have been wronged (Feagin, 2010). Rolling the eyes is especially considered inappropriate in a professional context.

"There's Nothing We Can Do for You"…*If You're a Latina Mother*

Luisa was a high school student who was failing her algebra class and complained that her teacher did not help the students learn the material. Her mother, Sra. Torres, went to speak to the teacher who indicated her grades were based on her lack of understanding and not on a failure to complete assignments. He suggested afterschool tutoring. After receiving tutoring, Luisa still failed another exam. When the teacher refused to give the student a copy of the failed exam to examine her mistakes, Sra. Torres decided to ask the counselor to switch her daughter to a different class and instructor.

I accompanied Sra. Torres and Luisa to speak with the counselor. We sat opposite the counselor's desk. Sra. Torres made her request in heavily accented but comprehensible English. The counselor immediately stated, "There's nothing we can do." He went on to explain that students could not switch classes whenever they chose, and he said there were no open spaces in other classes. I had been watching and listening but had not spoken. After the counselor's response, I noted the immediate look of resignation in Sra. Torres' eyes as she first looked at me and then hunched over and looked down. I then spoke up in English and noted the counselor's immediate shift in his eyes as he straightened up and looked at me for the first time. I said, looking at him and with an authoritative voice, "She is her mother, and she has the right as such to ask that her child be moved if she is unhappy with the teacher." The counselor looked

directly at me for about two seconds and then stood up and said he needed to talk it over with the principal. He returned less than five minutes later, looked at his computer, and said that he would do it this time.

Here, it was my cultural capital that was respected and not the mother's request. Symbolic violence is evident in his refusal to consider the request made by the Latina mother presumed to have little power or knowledge of the system. Both the counselor and the mother adhered to society's notions of who has power and who does not. His immediate response after my request suggests that he assumed I might have the power and knowledge to take the issue to someone with greater authority than his. Given the speed at which the change was made, we can assume that he had not been truthful about the lack of space, evidence of his summarily dismissing her request.

Let's Assume a Parent Doesn't Know What's Best for Her Kids…*If She's Latina*

Sra. Ramirez's son Carlos became ill with the flu when he was in kindergarten. Sr. Ramirez is a physician and thus knew that the best way of caring for the child would be to keep him home from school to rest, drink fluids, and take Tylenol®. After one week of absences, Carlos still had a bad cough but his temperature had returned to normal. Sra. Ramirez took Carlos to school. She wrote a note herself, as her mother had done when she was a child and was ill. The note explained the week's absence. She left it with the school office clerk. A few hours later, Sra. Ramirez received a call from the school because her son was crying at the nurse's office complaining of an earache. Sra. Ramirez picked up her son from school and this time took him to the clinic where he was given antibiotics and told to stay home from school for the remainder of the week. The doctor wrote a note for the days following the visit. While at the doctor's visit, Sra. Ramirez recalled that they had made travel plans prior to Carlos's illness, and she asked the doctor if it would be ok to go on the two-day trip to Mammoth. The doctor had said that by the following week, Carlos's earache should be fine, and he should be able go to Mammoth, so the family went.

Upon returning to school, Sra. Ramirez was told by the school office clerk that she had to have a meeting with the principal. Sra. Ramirez was previously a teacher, and now is a teacher educator. She is familiar with schools and schooling in the United States. However, as Carlos was her first child, this was her first year experiencing the public school as a parent. She assumed it would be an informal talk in which the principal would ask why the child had been out for so long, and she would explain the circumstances. She was unprepared for what followed. The office clerk escorted her into the principal's office. Around the small table in the office sat the principal and Carlos's teacher. Sra.

Ramirez was asked to sit, and the office clerk also sat down. The principal had a pencil and pad on which she took notes of what was said at the meeting. The office clerk had files in front of her.

Clerk: We did not get a note from you for Carlos's absences.

Sra. Ramirez: I gave you one.

Clerk: (Looking in a file folder). I have a doctor's note for the second week he was out but not for the first.

Sra. Ramirez: I did not take him to the doctor the first week. He had the flu, with fever and a bad cough. My husband is a physician, so we knew his doctor would only prescribe Tylenol®.

Office Clerk: But we still need a note for those days.

Sra. Ramirez: I wrote a note. I handed it to you a few days ago.

Principal: It's not excused unless it is from the doctor. You are only allowed three unexcused absences in the year.

Sra. Ramirez: Okay, I know that now. But he was ill the first absent days. You must know because when I brought him back he still had a bad cough, and the nurse called me to pick him up because he had gotten an ear infection.

Principal: You need a doctor's note if he is absent three days or more. That's the way it is everywhere. When I am out for more than three days, I have to bring a doctor's note.

Sra. Ramirez: Well, there's no reason to take him to the doctor where he is likely to get more sick as a result of contact with other sick patients when we already know what is wrong with him.

Principal: When I am sick three days, I have to bring a doctor's note.

Sra. Ramirez: Well, I don't have to do that in my position, so I did not know.

Principal: When I am sick three days, I have to bring a doctor's note.

Sra. Ramirez: (staring at the principal, not sure what to say since she keeps repeating herself)

Clerk: You mentioned Carlos sometimes doesn't want to come to school.

Sra. Ramirez: Yes, he doesn't want to come to school, but that doesn't mean I don't bring him to school!

Office Clerk: Well, we have to report everything in case the District Attorney asks for it.

Principal: Ms. Flores (Carlos's teacher) is here to tell us how Carlos is doing.

Teacher: (eyes wide, looking apprehensive) Well I know that you (speaking to Sra. Ramirez) have been concerned about his social skills, but I see him playing well with all the kids.

Sra. Ramirez: Well, I already know what is going on. He doesn't want to come to school because he doesn't want to stay in the afterschool program. We're taking care of it. We have to find some alternate child care options.

Teacher: But he seems happy in class.

Sra. Ramirez: He may seem happy in class, but at home he cries for days in anticipation of the days he goes to the afterschool program. I know it is that he only stays Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, and as a result he hasn't been able to make friends that easily.

Principal: Why don't you leave him for the five days? It's a good program.

Sra. Ramirez: Actually, I think its too academic for a kindergartner, and I think he benefits from what he and I can do together on the days I can pick him up after school.

Principal: (raised eyebrows, shaking her head) I disagree. He will do much better in a structured program. I would leave him every day. He will get used to it.

Sra. Ramirez: I don't want to do that. We'll figure something out (standing to leave).

At first glance the scenario above seems benign enough. The principal enacted her role as the school leader to enquire about excessive unexcused absences and to inform the parent about the law regarding absences. The formal nature of the interaction and the roles enacted by the leader (principal), supporting actors (clerk and teacher), and the target of "intervention" (parent) are not surprising. These are common interactions in spaces where someone has institutional power vis-à-vis another, such as a doctor's office where a doctor recommends treatments or explains an illness. In such contexts, the symbolic power of the individual is manifested through her/his demeanor, the specialized language she/he uses, the physical space, and the cultural tools utilized. Symbolic violence comes about when these artificial aspects are utilized by the professional in such a way that makes her/his power seem "natural" and goes unchallenged.

However, when one deconstructs the embedded messages in the context above, it becomes evident that the messages are utilized in such a way that they dehumanize and devalue the Latina mother. First, the parent, Sra. Ramirez, is a Latina woman. As such, any mention of legal concerns is sure to raise her level of anxiety. The history of racial profiling among police departments in communities of color has been well documented, and most people of color grow up fearing the legal institution (Glover, 2009). In addition, the racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is well documented, a fact recognized as a consequence of cultural difference and/or poverty (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011), but that nonetheless may lead to the common stereotype of being "abusive" and "neglectful" toward children as evidenced. The fear of having your child taken away from you by children's social services due to mistaken assumptions is many Latina mothers' greatest fear. With education, this

fear is intensified as the wise words of family and friends are verified through research that supports that Latino families do not fare well in legal matters (Walker, Senger, Villarruel, & Arboleda, 2004). Anytime the police (in this case, the DA) are mentioned in the presence of a person of color it IS a direct threat of violence.

Second, the formality of the context and the power it bestowed upon the principal was used as a means to alter and, thus, control the mother's actions. The meeting in the principal's office that places the parent within the principal's domain, the group of supports that the principal assembles, the notes that the principal takes and can be used as "evidence," and the "request" for a meeting are all cultural tools that bestow power upon the principal and, at the same time, point to her existing power in being able to assemble their use.

Finally, there is the violence of dehumanization and devaluation of a person through the questioning tactics that make Sra. Ramirez feel defensive, the repetition from the principal that suggests Sra. Ramirez *needs* repetition to understand, the lack of response to Sra. Ramirez's statement that she did not know about the three-day proof rule and that she does not have that rule in her own job, which suggests the principal was not listening or did not believe her. In addition, the principal was dismissive with respect to Sra. Ramirez's concern for her son's social fears and for her choice of not keeping him in school until late in the evening every day when it was not necessary to do so. Indeed, the principal's statement that the child needs the structure suggested that her knowledge of education matters is sufficient and more useful in determining the best course of action for a child. This discounts and undermines a mother's intimate knowledge of her child. The lack of cultural awareness that the principal displayed by not acknowledging the value that Latina mothers place on being the primary caretakers of their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) suggests a disdain for the culture, particularly given that the said school serves an almost entirely Latino and African American community.

Feeling Violated

I am using the phrase, "feeling violated," to describe the reactions that Latina mothers experience when faced with episodes of violence, such as those described above. These consequences are manifested in observable activity and in thought processes. I believe—as do many of the Latinas I have studied with—episodes of violence occur because of our gender and race and the assumptions that we pose little threat to the perpetrators. Below, I highlight common reactions of the Latina mothers.

Astonishment

It seems that no matter how often one experiences episodes of violence, a sense of astonishment often prevails as the immediate reaction. Typically, we feel tongue-tied, our minds go blank, and as we exit the scene we ask ourselves, "What just happened?" Only later do we consider all of the many ways we should have responded. While I can understand how an immigrant Latina mother who does not know the education system well may feel intimidated, the impetus for this paper was spawned as I began to experience first-hand the fear that renders Latina mothers silent and/or defensive during these episodes of violence. Even with the cultural capital that my experience in education and my advanced degree provides, I have reacted to episodes of violence in ways that resembled those of the many Latina mothers I have observed in similar situations. It is as if, in the face of institutionalized violence, we instinctually perceive ourselves through the eyes of the dominant group—absurd for having our particular worldview and powerless to challenge the dominant perspectives of school personnel.

That these episodes of violence have happened to me, even though school personnel know I am a faculty member in a teacher education program, suggests that regardless of a Latina mother's life and/or professional experience, when she enters her child's school, she is perceived and treated according to firmly held assumptions about Latina mothers as undereducated, lacking knowledge of the education system, and having few resources to aid in self-advocacy. While as education professionals we insist that teachers must know their students well in order to tap into their strengths and understand their needs (Bartolome, 2004; Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005), we address mothers in our schools as if they come devoid of personal histories and current life circumstances that impact their worldviews and daily functioning.

Excessive Self-Monitoring

When confronted with symbolic violence, the Latina mothers I know and I often reacted by excessively questioning our own practices and our views on the matter at hand. "Was I wrong in the practices that were critiqued?" "Was I wrong in taking offense at the approach the principal took in discussing it with me?" We play the scene over and over again in our own minds, and we share what happened with family and friends in order to gauge their reactions to see if they lend validity to our perspective.

Often we wonder what we could or should have done differently to avoid the confrontation. As with victims of other forms of violence against women, Latina mothers question whether the assault was deserved and whether there

would have been something we could have done differently to avoid the violence (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992). Most of the time our "fault" boils down to having "other" values and lifestyles, ones that do not match the expectations of schools that function from a White racial frame (Feagin, 2010).

For example, truancy is an important matter to monitor. Young people may not see the long-term benefits of education and may be negatively impacted academically by excessive absences (Wilson, Malcolm, Edward, & Davidson, 2008). However, presumptions of truancy should not be made without evidence, and flexibility in what constitutes an excused absence is needed as a means to acknowledge parental rights, cultural values, and the specific situations of families. Family vacations, visits to one's home country, and other special outings provide important learning opportunities for children, including Latino children in working-class families (Faustiche Orellana, 2009; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Further, attending to the needs of one's social networks has been shown to be critically important for low-income immigrant families, even though they may sometimes interfere with school hours and homework activities (Valdés, 1996). Instead of blanket regulations, the child's progress in school should be taken into consideration and plans for home study or other supports made. Unfortunately, truancy is increasingly marked by racial profiling (Blume, 2011), and Latino and other parents of color are positioned as "uncaring" parents who must be *forced* to send their children to school as if these parents did not value education.

My data suggests that sometimes Latina mothers recognize that our practices could be challenged, but it is in the approach taken by school personnel that we take primary offense. In these cases, the sense of being violated came not from the actions or critiques made but from the cultural insensitivity with which they were handled. We see that there was a lack of understanding of our particular situation and an inability to really hear and try to understand our explanations. We see the cultural bias and wonder why the state must regulate those things we feel should fall within the parent's sphere of decision-making.

An important aspect of symbolic violence is that because it is seen as "natural" it makes the targets of violence question the validity of their own perceptions, including the sense that they have been violated. Again, in similar fashion to other forms of violence against women, Latina mothers interrogate, not only the actions that resulted in the assault, but also their feelings of having been violated. The dismissal of our concerns, including the perpetrator's rolling of the eyes (see episodes of violence above), are examples of common "little" ways in which we are dehumanized by being made to feel less capable of rational thoughts.

Avoiding the Perpetrator

One of the results of violence, symbolic or otherwise, is an attempt to avoid facing repeated offenses. For Latina mothers, this has meant staying away from the school and/or being silenced (Salas, 1994). It may mean that assistance is not sought when needed. There is a sense of betrayal inherent when the notion that "we are in this together" only applies as long as I follow all the guidelines set forth by the school and/or the state, and when I do not, there is little concern on the part of the school as to why. This inflexibility and lack of understanding threatens home–school relations in Latina/o communities where people's lives are impacted by multiple jobs and/or joblessness, other class-related issues, cultural differences, varying language needs, and a multitude of other personal and structural circumstances.

Fear of Retaliation

In many cases, Latina mothers who feel violated prefer to live out their pain in silence for fear of retaliation against their children. This is the consistent first response when I have asked mothers why they did not complain or express their sense of unfairness regarding episodes of violence. It has also been my response when the same question has been posed to me. We fear that even if the perpetrator is not the teacher, our complaints will trickle down to the classroom level. We fear being labeled a "problem parent" whose infamous reputation will follow our children from year to year, possibly affecting their opportunities in the classroom, relationships with teachers, and grading.

Leading Through Caring: "I Am a Mother Too"

These episodes of symbolic violence are predicated on the deficit perspectives inherent in stereotypes of Latino families (Volk & Long, 2005). In each case, the education leaders were acting on their expectations of the mother based on broader stereotypes of the community. Without questioning these interactions, the educators failed to challenge the typical way in which school personnel and parents typically enact power relations. But each of these episodes could have been transformed into "caring encounters" (Noddings, 1992). The common use of the term is too intangible to be operationalized well and has resulted in misunderstandings between students and teachers who interpret caring in different ways (Valenzuela, 1999). Nel Noddings (1992) has proposed that actions are manifestations of caring only when both parties interpret the act as one of caring. From this approach, a teacher cannot indicate acts that belittle or create distance as acts of caring in the name of increased academic performance if students do not interpret these acts similarly. Caring from this

approach views the child as a whole person and a unique individual. This suggests that students must be viewed as people with feelings and ideas, impacted by multiple sociocultural factors, and who learn continuously and make mistakes in that process. While students' academic growth is important, their socio-emotional development—how they view themselves and the world and the relationships they develop—are as, if not more, important. This framework for caring is captured well by Michael Katz (2005) in an address to parents:

> When we care, we open ourselves up to accepting and receiving the other in his/her full otherness, in his/her full individuality—we accept and receive the other's thoughts and feelings without critical judgment—for understanding and accepting the other is more important than judging him or her. To be "cared for" in a caring encounter is to be fully received, fully accepted, fully appreciated. It is to be validated in one's essential human-ness. It is to be affirmed in one's basic value as a person with worth and dignity. There is no substitute for this kind of "caring" in becoming a healthy person who can go on to live a flourishing life. (Caring section, para. 2)

Elsewhere (Monzó & Rueda, 2003), I have argued that caring for students of color means recognizing their differences, seeing and/or looking for the strengths that these differences create, and being willing to listen, mediate, and advocate on their behalf as needed. Although this work on caring has been used to discuss relationships between teachers and students, it can be extended to address home–school relations. With respect to Latina mothers, caring involves understanding their social position as women of color in our country and the many difficulties that this positioning creates. However, caring also must acknowledge that every cultural group develops resources and strengths and that people who are marginalized have to develop and garner their resources for survival in ways that the dominant group may not need to do. When leaders and other school personnel begin to understand and listen to Latino communities and Latina mothers, in particular, they will come to their interactions with an attitude that shows respect and a willingness to listen and learn. This is how caring encounters take shape. Consider the following example of a caring encounter.

When Sra. Cruz first placed her child in preschool, he was four years old and until then had been cared for primarily by his mother. Sra. Cruz selected a school that was known for its bilingual emphasis and its emphasis on play as a form of development, even though it meant driving quite a distance each day to reach it. The school's director was Filipino, and all but one of the teachers and staff members were Latinas fluent in Spanish and English. Upon her child's enrollment, the mother was encouraged to stay for a few days with her son at

the school throughout the day until he became comfortable with the context, the teachers, and the other children. On the first day that Sra. Cruz was going to leave her child at the preschool on his own, the child screamed and cried, grabbing onto his mother to stop her from leaving. Slowly, the teacher pried his little hands from his mother and held him comfortingly, reminding him that she would return for him in a few hours and trying to engage him in play. Sra. Cruz walked out of the school at the staffs' urging with tears in her eyes. The school's director followed Sra. Cruz onto the street, called her back, and reassured her that her son would be ok:

> We will call you in a little while and let you know how he is doing…I know how hard it is for you. I am a mother too. I cried all day long the first time I left my son at daycare.

Indeed the director called Sra. Cruz within two hours to tell her that her son had calmed down and was playing with the other children.

This episode exemplifies the notion of caring as Sra. Cruz tells the story with emotion, recalling that she felt supported and understood by the director's willingness to come out and speak to her after the emotional scene and to call her to report on her son's well being. Empathy was evident in this episode as the director was able to connect with her own feelings as a mother to understand the situation, and she made herself vulnerable to Sra. Cruz by sharing her similar experience with her own child. Here, power differences were removed as the director acknowledges the mother's role as caretaker who should be given an update without her having to request it.

Consider the differences between this episode of caring and the episodes of violence described earlier. In this caring episode, it is the mothers' caring for her child, her desire to keep him with her as much as possible, and the mother's rights as primary decision-maker to be made aware of her child's progress that is seen as natural, whereas in the episodes of violence it is the difference in power and the educator's presumed greater knowledge of what is best for the child that is taken as natural.

Caring for Latina Mothers: Suggestions for Leading With Caring

Below, I discuss various ways in which caring encounters between Latina mothers and school personnel can be fostered to replace the common mode of interacting through violence described above.

Start With the Assumption of Love

Studies (see, e.g., the research synthesis by Henderson & Mapp, 2002) have consistently shown that parents love their children and want what is best for

them (unless severely impaired by substance abuse or mental illness). Latino parents consistently express a desire for their children to have more opportunities than they themselves had (Monzó, 2005). When we assume that mothers love their children and want the best for them, we can come to these interactions with an open mind to understand what, rather than who, the problem may be. We can then move to solutions that are flexible and take into account the family's constraints and resources.

Start With the Assumption That Latino Parents Value Education for Their Children

Too often educators comment that "those parents don't care about their children's education" when the parents do not behave as expected (Valdés, 1996, 1998). For example, when Latino parents fail to attend a particular school function, the assumption that is often made is that they do not value education. Educators do not always recognize that, unlike middle-class parents who can afford childcare and may have the social network from which they can draw support, Latino immigrant families may not be able to afford childcare, may not have family or friends to watch their children, or may be unable to take time off of work to attend school functions. Numerous studies have shown that the assumption that Latino parents do not value education is false. Latino parents have a strong value for education and believe that an education will lead their children to social and economic mobility (Monzó, 2009a; Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000). Studies have also shown that Latino parents are involved with their children's schooling but that these practices are different than those commonly practiced among middle-class families (López, 2001).

Learn to Value Our Cultural Differences

All cultures are sustainable and develop activities and values that help them survive in the contexts in which they live (Rueda, Monzó, & Arzubiaga, 2003). Latino cultures in the U.S. are no different. They engage in the practices that both help them survive the constraints of their position in society as working-class people of color and as linguistic minorities. These contexts also support particular affordances, such as a sense of responsibility to the family that may translate into increased engagement with school (Monzó, 2009a) and cultural and linguistic brokering opportunities (Faustiche Orellana, 2009). When we recognize that all cultures have both valuable resources and constraints that may look different and show up in different spaces, we learn to recognize the actions that we do not understand or that we would do differently as a matter of cultural difference. This understanding helps us to minimize judgments about

cultural differences because we do not understand the differences' origins, what needs they may meet, or how they support the growth and development of group members. For example, when a child is unable to do their homework because they have a family function to attend, we as educators tend to judge this negatively, assuming a lesser value for education than for family outings. However, many of us educators do not know enough about the cultures of our students to understand the reciprocal nature of exchange practices that must be maintained among Latino immigrant families for survival (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Valdés, 1996). If we did, we would understand that the Latina mother is weighing her options and choosing the lesser of two evils, particularly when the homework can be done the following night. In addition, if we knew what goes on in these other activities that drew the child away from her homework, we may realize that these offer important opportunities for learning and development, and we may even tailor our homework activities to help identify and draw upon these resources (Moll et al., 1992).

Caring encounters require that school personnel come into any interaction with a Latina mother understanding that their knowledge of Latino cultural differences is limited and that these are marked not just by ethnicity but also by their positioning in our society. Thus, even Latina administrators and teachers may not understand fully the cultures of Latina mothers as their levels of education and income have moved them into different social spaces. When they come into an interaction with the assumption that the Latina mother must have important cultural constraints that impact the particular concern and that in some way the alternative they propose may have important affordances, then the school personnel will be *looking for* the resources that the situation supports. The concern, then, may be dealt with in terms of positive solutions that support both family needs and the academic needs of the child and/or needs of the school.

Listen and Hear—Usually Our Stories Are Real

I understand that there comes a point in which leaders who manage large systems such as schools may become desensitized to the specific circumstances of specific families, teachers, students, or staff members and that they may feel that people's explanations sound like excuses. However, if leaders could realize that situations that arise on a regular basis often only do so because there are so many people under their supervision, they would realize that, on an individual basis, the need to bend rules or make exceptions or deal with concerns is likely infrequent and related to only a small number of cases. If we consider that Latina mothers engage in multiple school-related tasks on a daily basis, year after year (taking children to and from school, dealing with attendance issues,

organizing school supplies, washing uniforms, helping with homework, motivating their children, and more), then we may realize that, in the big picture, the issues that arise are quite few. Too often Latina mothers face leaders and other school personnel who wear a desensitized veil that does not allow them to really hear what the Latina mothers are saying and, thus, they dismiss the significance of the comments or simply do not believe them. Over and over, Latina mothers express their need to be heard in schools (Salas, 2004).

Mothers' Knowledge *IS* Important

School administrators and other school personnel bring important knowledge of the field of education, the school system, learning, and instruction. However, all mothers, including Latina mothers, bring important specific knowledge about their children. Learning does not occur in a vacuum but rather in specific sociocultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1934/1987). The child does not enter the school grounds devoid of history and outside influences, and no one at the school can know this information better than a child's mother or primary caregiver. Further, teachers and principals observe students often in limited and contrived contexts, and although children spend much time in school, the attention of teachers and administrators is almost always divided among large groups of children. Therefore, the level of attention to one child at any given moment is rarely greater than that which a mother can provide. The assumption that the mother's knowledge about her child cannot contribute to decision-making about the child's academic context is erroneous and based on a false assumption that cognition is separate from other sociocultural factors, including economic, social, emotional, political, and health-related factors (Goldstein, 1999). While a principal can explain her or his understanding of an academic concern via examples of other children or the literature on child development and make recommendations accordingly, these recommendations must be weighed with a mother's knowledge of the individual needs of her child as well as what makes sense to her culturally and realistically, given their family's specific life constraints and affordances, and a family's goals for its children should be taken into account.

Why Does It Have to Be So Hard? Accommodate to the Community

The assumption that the community must accommodate to the cultural contexts of schools has been proven problematic (Au & Kawakami, 1994). If schools are to serve lower income communities of color, then schools must negotiate the opportunities afforded to families and to Latina mothers, specifically, to become involved with schools. Schools serving Latino students cannot

expect that low-income parents will be able to leave their jobs or take time off to attend school functions. Often such functions occur too early in the day for working parents. Rarely are there alternative opportunities for parents who work multiple jobs. Latina/o parents hold different values and engage in different cultural practices than the mainstream, but attempts to understand what these may be and alter school policies to meet these differences are only rarely documented. The community's needs, cultural values, and wishes must be part of the discussion when policy and activities are designed. For example, school functions in Latina/o communities should always include language and cultural scaffolds to make families feel welcome. Multiple venues and times should be available to accommodate the community's needs. Materials should be made available in Spanish. The political context of being a linguistic minority should be acknowledged as a factor in mothers' comfort level in the school and therefore mediated in culturally appropriate ways.

Don't Be an Agent of the State. Be the Professional You Are!

Current accountability systems and English-only policies go against what most of us as educators know is good for students (Dodge, 2009; Linton, 2007). I understand that administrators are responsible for complying with state and district regulations. However, many state and district regulations are mandated without specificity in the implementation (Revilla & Asato, 2002). As professionals educating teachers, we often encourage them to do what is right for students regardless of what the state demands. If the state wants performance on standardized tests, we tell teachers to take standardized tests seriously but to focus first on helping students become critical and analytical thinkers, engaging young minds, and building relationships (Díaz-Rico, 2010). We tell teachers to use whatever means they have available to support English learners, including using their primary language, being culturally responsive, and making all students feel valued and proud of their ethnic and racial diversity (Cummins et al., 2005). Many teacher educators encourage preservice teachers to be advocates of their students (Soohoo, 2004).

In similar fashion, school leaders must be advocates for the community that their school serves (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). As a professional, it is important to know what the community needs and what their resources are, to be willing to learn from them, and to use their skills and knowledge to do what is right for the students and their community. Learning about the school community can be achieved through multiple means, including building relationships with families, organizing parent-based committees, spending time outside of school in the neighborhood, and developing community-based projects that students can be engaged in and that can inform

teachers and school leaders. Trumbull et al. (2003) document how teacher research can be a powerful tool for learning about a community and can also develop in teachers a sense of caring for, engagement with, and advocacy toward the community.

In California, for example, current state policy and regulations do not support the needs of our racially and linguistically diverse communities (Collier & Auerbach, 2011). Rather than using a punitive and inflexible system to encourage attendance, school leaders can be flexible about providing solutions for parents who travel for work or family matters and must take their children with them. School administrators can create schoolwide policy that allows for flexibility with homework, having it turned in weekly rather than daily. School leaders can encourage teachers to assign homework that relates to activities that children can do with parents and that do not need translation. Leaders can be instrumental in helping Latino students recognize their own potential and the strengths they bring to our society by encouraging community members to share their language and other skills with students through classroom presentations, leading instructional groups, or reading to the students in Spanish.

Preparing Leaders for Diverse Schools

The data and ideas posed above suggest the need to increase awareness about home–school relations in Latino and other nondominant communities as part of the requirements for teacher and administrative credential programs and other leadership programs in education. Education programs must provide avenues for students who will work in schools to learn to interact effectively with Latino and other nondominant groups. Students must have a strong grasp on theory related to cultural differences and sociopolitical factors impacting racial and linguistic minority populations. Further, they must have the opportunity to interact with and see firsthand the strengths and resources that Latino and other communities of color draw from to manage their lives and to support their children's education. Various projects with teachers have shown that engaging teachers in action research within communities of people that are different from themselves leads to increased understanding of the community, changes in teacher organization and pedagogy to reflect a collectivist orientation, better home–school relations, and adopting an advocacy role (Moll et al., 1992; Trumbull et al., 2003). Thus, course assignments should be developed that take preservice teachers and other future educators into the community and have them directly interacting with families. These should be extensive projects that involve a large portion of the semester so that students can gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding than they would

obtain from brief activities. Another promising approach can be gleaned from the work of Sutterby, Rubin, and Abrego (2007), in which preservice teachers worked with Latino students in a reading tutoring program that included weekly interactions with family members. Preservice teachers were supported through conversation starters that helped them gain information regarding the students' home practices and interests and the families' goals for their children. These regular and respectful interactions fostered *amistades* (friendships) between the preservice teachers and the families.

Future teachers and education leaders must read about and analyze culturally responsive strategies used by other teachers and administrators and be encouraged to develop their own innovative, strength-based approaches to home–school relations. Specialized courses on the topic of home–school relations and the cultural and sociopolitical factors impacting nondominant groups are especially appropriate for masters and doctoral level programs. Credential programs must extend readings, discussions, and assignments related to culturally responsive instruction to interacting with parents and community members. Although credential programs are often tightly structured given state demands on curriculum, drawing diverse faculty with expertise in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students often leads to greater inclusion of diversity issues across courses in addition to the concentration of this material in one diversity course (McKinney & Capper, 2010). Furthermore, course assignments that address pedagogical skills can often be combined with diversity concerns in order to infuse best practices for the teaching of culturally diverse students across the program.

An especially important approach is to develop a praxis component to coursework in which preservice teachers and other education leaders are able to experience firsthand what a school that reaches out to the community looks and feels like. This offers education students the opportunity to interact with families and see other teachers and educators interacting with families in respectful ways. An important component of this may be the use of Professional Development Schools (PDS) as described by de la Piedra, Munter, and Giron (2006) that can influence and be influenced by university faculty and research in ways that support strong home–school relations with families and communities being viewed as a central aspect of structuring best education practices for diverse students. de la Piedra et al. (2006) suggest that, as a result of involvement in schools that actually sustain strong and positive home–school relations, preservice teachers gained respect for low-income and immigrant families, challenged their own stereotypes, and learned how to interact with families in collaborative ways. An important aspect of this work is that it also allowed Latino preservice teachers to affirm their histories and to draw on these to enhance their own learning and their interactions with families.

In this article, I have shown that Latina mothers often experience symbolic violence in school contexts and that this may have painful psychological consequences and keep mothers from actively participating in schools. I have shown that a caring approach is one that builds on the strengths of Latino communities, listens carefully to their concerns, recognizes their values and needs, and works *with* Latina mothers to create the best learning contexts for their children. As discussed above, an important starting place for transforming schools into caring contexts for Latino communities is bringing awareness, empathy, and expertise to teachers and other school personnel. I believe that, when employed systematically, a caring approach toward home–school relations can have an important positive impact on the students, the school, and the entire community.

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Latino Families Challenging Exclusion in a Middle School: A Story from the Trenches

Pablo Jasis

Abstract

This study examines a grassroots, school-centered parent and family organizing effort from the actual "trenches" in the struggle for equity and excellence in education. This is an exploration of the intrinsic value and the complex dynamics of the organizing process of a small group of Latino immigrant parents struggling to improve their children's educational opportunities at their local middle school. It is based on a microanalysis of the parents' interactions, exploring the process of awareness and mobilization as the participant families challenged established school policies and practices they perceived as discriminatory towards the education of their children. It chronicles and examines the process by which the participating families and their children increased their visibility in the school community, eventually gaining access to more challenging instruction and to an improved school experience. The author examines the parents' process of engagement at the school by focusing on specific moments and interactions called trigger events, which play a critical role in the parents' mobilization. These events galvanize and inspire their increased participation in a process marked by initial feelings of indignation and alienation but which, over time, engages the participants in a journey of joint discovery, collaboration, and hope.

Key Words: parents, participation, Latino schooling, school reform, empowerment theory, social movements, middle schools, tracking, access, family involvement, activism, trigger events, collaboration, families, junior high

Introduction

There is an emerging body of literature dedicated to chronicling and analyzing the role that progressive parent activism can play in school reform, particularly among historically underserved communities (Jasis & Marriott, 2010; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Shirley, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Worgs, 2011). Many of these recent studies focus on regional and nationwide organizations, programs, and coalitions that over time and through remarkable strategic vision and organizational partnerships were able to gain significant clout on educational, political, and institutional spheres (Henig, 2011; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). There is, however, considerably less investigation into the process of local, grassroots, school-centered parent and family organizing efforts and about the deep motivations, the challenges, and the potential of these smaller scale initiatives to impact the quality of educational services provided to the families' children on a school-by-school basis.

The purpose of this study is to chronicle and examine one of these emerging examples of parent organizing at the local level, from the actual "trenches" in the struggle for equity and excellence in education. This is an exploration of the intrinsic value and the complex dynamics of the organizing efforts of a small group of Latino immigrant parents struggling to equalize their children's educational opportunities at a local middle school. (Note: The term parents will be used throughout this narrative to refer to parents, grandparents, and other caregivers.) At the time of this investigation, these families' children were part of an emerging minority in the school community, often less visible at school functions and generally regarded as a low-achieving student population by many teachers based on their performance of various benchmark assessments. This study analyzes the process by which, over time and through daily and committed organizing efforts, these families and their children increased their visibility in the school community, gained access to more challenging instruction, and generally improved their school experience.

This investigation is intended as a contribution to the literature on grassroots social movements, and it centers its examination on specific events and interactions that took place throughout the parent organizing process at a neighborhood school during a number of community meetings. I examine throughout this paper the importance of specific interactions during the parents' struggle, analyzing their impact on the process of individual and collective awareness. These events, called here *trigger events* (Woliver, 1992), fueled the participants' motivations to become local education activists on behalf of their children and of other families' children. Although there were a number of trigger events and significant interactions throughout the families' engagement

and mobilization at this school community, this study focuses on the process by which a group of Latino families challenged a school's practice of selecting students for its upper-track math instruction, which the parents perceived as unequal and discriminatory towards their children.

Based on the input from the participating parents, teachers, and students, this particular trigger event and its aftermath helped to significantly change the way the school perceived these students and their families, helping them gain visibility and eventually improving access to quality instruction. Conversely, it was also instrumental in enhancing the families' views of the school from a perceived site of relative alienation toward a more hopeful vision of the school as an institution dedicated to their children's academic development with a nurturing outlook.

The math placement issue was chosen for investigation among other trigger events that also impacted the development of the school community's consciousness for specific reasons. First, because it aptly exemplifies, more than others throughout this process, the complexity of the dynamics involved in the participants' engagement, the depth of their commitment to their cause, and their strategic foresight as they struggled to change a perceived system of institutional exclusion. Secondly, because from its inception and through its aftermath this event contained many of the elements of consciousness raising that exemplify effective community action toward social change, such as an exploratory understanding of discriminatory practices, a collective disposition towards challenging institutional exclusion, a joint strategizing with clear goals and objectives, the development of grassroots leadership, and a planned, methodic set of interactions with other stakeholders in the process, such as teachers and administrators (Freire, 1994; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005).

The study of emerging parent mobilizing initiatives such as the one examined in this paper should help educational leaders understand and support other examples of grassroots organizing in different contexts, where parent and family engagement around schooling can also make a significant difference in the quality of education their children receive. An exploration of inclusive local efforts by low-income families working in solidarity can also help model larger initiatives for school reform, equity in education, and the development of citizenship at the local level.

Parent Activism and Schools

There is a robust body of research that supports the positive academic influence of parent participation in improving academic outcomes (Epstein, 2009; Funkhouser & Gonzalez, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Lam,

1997). More recently, research has also been focusing on the need to equalize the schools' approach to diverse parents and families (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado Gaitan, 2004; Jasis & Jasis-Ordoñez, 2004–2005; Lareau, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 1990; Valdés, 1996). There is, however, comparatively less investigation focusing on the history, the development, and the overall efficacy of parent *activism* in expanding and improving education for diverse children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005; Warren, 2011).

Parent activism, defined here as the efforts of caregivers to promote, advocate, mobilize, or direct social, political, environmental, or institutional change in schools, is often examined as an expression of public engagement at the local, grassroots level (Orr & Rogers, 2011; Shirley, 2011). As such, it has deep historical roots dating back to the first experiments of American public schooling (Shirley, 2011). However, with the notable exception of the underground African American schools in the South during the times of slavery and segregation (Smith, 1998), it was only beginning in the 1950s that parent activism and advocacy were recognized as significant factors in the educational landscape and as an expression of expanding social struggles for equality and civil rights (Warren, 2011).

Since then, whether in the form of incipient, highly localized organizing or in the most visible expressions of mobilized communities and grassroots coalitions, parent activism has become a critical tool towards equity in education for historically underserved populations, particularly communities of color. In addition, parent activism through its many configurations has inspired wider struggles for social justice, at times developing a significant capacity to influence policymakers and to increase educational access and opportunities (Fraga & Frost, 2011; Worgs, 2011). In the words of Warren and Mapp (2011), "rather than remaining the passive victims of an unjust system, parents and young people are becoming active agents in their schools and communities" (p. 4) through grassroots parent organizing.

The study of the factors that impact—and at times mobilize—parent activism among communities with lower socioeconomic and educational indicators necessarily involves an examination of schooling in the context of social inequality, poverty, and its consistent companion, political marginalization (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Along these lines, an effort to contextualize parent activism in schools must also include an analysis of the policies that legitimize inequality in society, as well as an exploration of the social forces that have historically resisted and challenged oppressive educational policies and practices (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005, 2012; Muñoz, 1989; San Miguel, 1996; Smith, 1998; Warren, 2011). Wells, Anyon, and Oakes (2011) portray the context of the relationship between many working class families and their children's schools in a dramatic, yet realistic fashion:

> Holding two low-wage jobs to make ends meet can sap the energy of a parent and make it more difficult for her to negotiate the public systems and advocate for her children. Being poor in a rich country can lead to ill-placed shame, pervasive despair, and anger. Living in poverty means experiencing daily crises of food, finding a place to live, and keeping your children safe. All this can be debilitating and can certainly dampen the enthusiasm, effort, and outlook with which urban children and their families approach K–12 education. (Wells et al., 2011, p. 189)

In this context, the history of parent activism in schools, although clearly impacted by poverty and discrimination with all its daily challenges, also involves individual and communal processes of resistance and empowerment, at times carried out with remarkable levels of sophistication in its modes of participation and organizing, a communal process of self-determination and engagement which often develops its own grammar of internal democracy and participation (Lichterman, 1996). It is within this realm of emerging solidarity and mobilization among low-income families from communities of color that parent activism can become central to challenging discriminatory practices at the local level with the potential of reshaping educational and life prospects for all students.

The potential of parent activism to become a critical tool for progressive school reform, although clearly documented and examined in the literature, is impacted by external and internal factors that affect the outcome of these communities' struggles for quality education (Wells et al., 2011). In this context, parent activism in schools emerges against a backdrop of urban and rural poverty, competing for attention with daily survival needs for decent jobs, housing, health care, and basic services. In the real world, school-focused parent activism is often a challenging proposition for families and community groups, since these efforts are regularly impacted by scant or nonexistent funding for social initiatives and by the diverse and often contrasting agendas of its natural allies, such as community organizations, labor unions, and grassroots educational and political organizations. However, even in these difficult contexts, parent activism is increasingly becoming a most endearing and critical struggle for its participants because they see it as central to their families' and their community's future (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). It is in this context of smaller scale organizing initiatives that the need for trust, solidarity, and vision among the participants becomes the key for any hope of success in achieving significant change in local schools, as families engage in a process in which "enhanced feelings of interpersonal trust and reciprocity can lead to effective political engagement and policy" (Henig, 2011, p. 67). Closer to this study, family organizing experiences such as the one examined in the following pages

should be understood as an addition to this emerging area of inquiry in an effort to help model effective partnerships for school reform among underserved communities.

Methods and Data Analysis

The examination of parent organizing at a middle school I will call North Side is part of a larger two-year study conducted at the site in Northern California. This is an ethnographic research endeavor that involved understanding dynamic developments in a social phenomenon as it evolves in context (Weiss, 1998). At the heart of this study are the following research questions: Can the examination of highly localized, smaller-scale grassroots efforts shed light on how to articulate authentic parent engagement towards strategic family–school partnerships? What is the nature of the events and processes that support the emergence and development of parent activism in the context of historically underserved populations?

In addressing these questions throughout this study, my role was that of a participant observer, a stance that engages a capacity to record, describe, and analyze behaviors and interactions with proven focus on reliability and relevance while involved in the examined phenomenon within its context (Gans, 1999). Applying this notion to this investigation, 22 parent activists and community informants were interviewed throughout the process, using pseudonyms for identification. Over 200 hours of community meetings and events were recorded, transcribed, color-coded, and organized according to thematic strands.

The participants in this study are Spanish-speaking members of lower income Latino families, all of them immigrants of Mexican origin with no more than five years in the United States. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, translated to English, and systematically shared with bilingual community partners for accuracy, validity, and integrity of translation and meaning. These partners included a parent organizer who was involved since the initial family meetings on the math placement, a bilingual teacher who became involved in addressing the families' concerns, as well as two members of a local community organization who joined the participants at a later stage to support their mobilization efforts. The transcribed interviews were also shared on an informal basis with groups of participants for additional input. The triangulation of data was of particular importance since this study is an examination of the deeper meanings and understandings of the participants who were impacted and changed throughout their process of activism and because *their* interpretation of those transformations are at the heart of this study. This methodological approach also reflects an effort to "explain more fully the richness and complexity

of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint" (Cohen & Manion, 2000, p. 254).

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis the author's interactions vis-à-vis the informant community were guided by Bruner's (1994) notion towards interpreting and reinterpreting personal experience in a process where narrative and life are seen as profoundly intertwined. The value of personal narratives in context is also a significant undercurrent throughout this effort, in a manner consistent with Beverley's (2005) approach to *testimonios,* understood here as a means of giving analytical center stage to society's subaltern voices in articulating an in-depth sociohistorical examination. In analyzing *community*, this study approaches this notion in a dynamic fashion, understanding it as a fluid entity that is historically impacted and often binds human histories and endeavors through shared interests, subjectivities, and visions of society and life. It is an ethnographic stance also informed by the work of Bertaux and Kohli (1984), who posed that personal narratives have the power to encapsulate sociohistorical complexities and contradictions in a context where subjectivity plays a central role in human agency.

The Workings of Parent Activism

The following sections include a description of a series of specific interactions, which are chronicled and analyzed below as an example of a trigger event, in the context of this particular process of school-focused community involvement. A trigger event is understood here as a critical juncture which helps commit and mobilize a group of individuals, propelling them to transform concerns into dispositions and dispositions into collective actions.

Trigger events in the context of social mobilization often take place as a result of significant situations charged of symbolic meaning (Jasis, 2000), and such was the case of the environments and interactions examined in this study. The math placement challenge described below, as well as the resulting meetings among the students' parents and between parents and teachers, are seen here as a trigger event because it captured the contradictions, main motivations, and complex dynamics that were critical to the emerging organizing capacity of the participants in this context, their determination and vision, as well as the multilevel impact of their actions in the school community.

The Context for This Study

North Side Middle School is located in a formerly industrial area of a mid-size Northern California city. It is a large and diverse institution of almost a thousand students, where the Latino student population grew from a total

of 11% to over 23% of the student body in the two years prior to this study. The performance of Latino students at North Side was considerably lower on standardized tests than many of their classmates. While European American students performed at 92% of the national rate for reading, Latinos performed at 42%. Tests in math showed a similar academic gap: Latino seventh graders at North Side scored at 46% of the national average, while their European American counterparts scored at 83%. At the time of this study, the school was engaging in a serious effort to provide increased academic support to address the academic achievement gap, and while plans included suggestions on parental participation, Latino parents began to organize at North Side on their own initiative to support their children's education. The following narrative chronicles and examines their efforts.

From the Trenches: Indignation and Collective Action

The parents' meeting is being held at the local library, a few blocks away from the town's only middle school. This is an older building, with large posters on the walls in which well-known media personalities promote reading with children and families. Martha Gutierrez, the mother of an eighth grader at North Side Middle School, joins the meeting a bit late this cold evening. The deliberations had started 20 minutes earlier, and 42 parents and grandparents from North Side Middle School briefly introduced themselves to the full group, as many of them have done every Wednesday for the last three months. All of them are recent Latino immigrants, and their introductions are in Spanish. Some of the women hold younger children in their laps, while many of their older siblings play hopscotch and soccer in a spacious parking lot behind the main reading room. For 11 of the participants, this is the first parents' meeting they ever attended; they found out about it through word of mouth, most of them personally invited by the parents of their children's classmates.

Mrs. Gutierrez's entrance is fast and deliberate, and her expression is stern. She catches the immediate attention of many of the participants who briefly direct their looks at her and away from Susana Durán, a volunteer parent organizer who helped write today's agenda and is presenting her detailed ideas for a *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration at the school. Mrs. Gutierrez acknowledges the attention of the parents and grandparents in attendance, smiles quickly as she sits down and immediately returns to her more serious demeanor, directing her looks firmly towards the presenter. Soon after taking a seat, she begins to bounce her right knee repeatedly in her chair in a sign of impatience. Noticing her urgency to speak, Mrs. Durán pauses her presentation to introduce Mrs. Gutierrez to her audience, in a dialogue translated here from Spanish:

Mrs. Durán: (with a smile) Hi Martha, I'm glad you made it! Well, you all met Mrs. Gutierrez at other family meetings before, I think she has something important to share with us…

Mrs. Gutiérrez: (still with a serious demeanor, but forcing out a slight smile) Hi, everyone! ... look Susana and all parents, the truth is that this time I am very upset!... I only now happened to find out, just this morning, that the math my children have been taking these years will not be good for **anything! Even if they do well it will not help them in high school!** [Note: bold denotes speaker's emphasis]

Mrs. Durán: ... perhaps we can discuss that later ...

Mrs. Gutierrez: No! I'd rather discuss it now! ... because I am sure there are many parents that don't know about this, and **they need to know!**

Mr. Sotelo (a parent): Susana, it seems that this is something very important for everybody that should be included in the agenda and discussed tonight.

Mrs. Durán: I guess you are right Martha... let's discuss it tonight and see what we can all do about this.

The prior dynamics at the meeting are visibly shaken, and the agenda is about to be modified to accommodate new—and apparently more urgent—issues. All participants now seem absorbed by the interactions between Mrs. Durán and Mrs. Gutiérrez, as they direct sustained looks at both women, denoting increased interest in the topics brought up by the discussion. Soon the same attention is directed at Mr. Sotelo when he intervenes. Eventually, Mrs. Durán regains control of the proceedings by saying, "OK, let's discuss what Martha brings up, but as soon as we are done with the preparations for the *Día de los Muertos*."

The suggestion was accepted, and several parents including Mrs. Gutiérrez nod in response. After an easing of tensions, the logistics for the Day of the Dead celebration are quickly agreed upon, and new voices emerge among the group as they listen to Mrs. Gutierrez's information about a lower level of math and science being taught to many of their children at the local middle school. After describing her recent conversation with her daughter's teacher, Mrs. Gutierrez invites the parents in attendance to discuss possible group strategies to bring the issue effectively in front of teachers and administrators and to agree on a joint plan of action to respond to her new findings. At this point in the deliberations the parent-activists have recognized the importance of the information and the need to share it with a wider audience in the community, while exploring a terrain of negotiation within the context of the school. The discussions elicit the emergence of new voices, among them Mrs. Barragán. She is a soft-spoken garment worker by trade who has two daughters in the school and wants to make sure that any inquiry by the parents should be seen in a respectful, collaborative spirit by school personnel.

Mrs. Barragan: I think this is a very important issue affecting the children, and Martha should be able to bring it to a meeting with the teachers and the principal because it really affects us all, but if we ask for a meeting with them, they have to feel respected by us, and **then** we can ask any questions, because they will see that we are the children's parents—that we are concerned and just want them to be motivated to succeed!

Mrs. Gutiérrez wants to focus attention on planning a joint meeting with parents and teachers, where the math placement and the assessment criteria can be clearly explained to the families and where changes can be proposed. These are her words:

I want to hear directly from them, because maybe we don't have all the information about this, but if we see that they have to change something in the way they teach, well, they should change it!

After voicing their ideas, the participants agreed to call the math teachers and the school principal for a dialogue about the school's class placement criteria and to suggest alternatives. They also decided to create a five-member subcommittee in charge of formulating 10 basic questions to be asked to the attending teachers at the planned dialogue, to take place within the following three weeks.

The math placement issue is discussed, a consistent plan of action is established, and a date for the next meeting is agreed upon. As these issues are discussed, an increasing level of engagement by all parents in attendance is apparent; they follow all deliberations intently, at times nodding in approval or making brief comments to people seated in adjacent chairs. The three remaining items in their agenda are then tabled for the next meeting because of lack of time, and the meeting is adjourned.

Soon the families with their children leave the library room in a celebratory mood, many hug one another, several of the adults in attendance help put the trash away, while two of the mothers offer the rest of the pastries, cookies, sodas, and coffee to other participants to take home. Three women and a man—Mr. Sotelo—are standing in a circle around Mrs. Gutiérrez, who is answering questions about additional information she has about the math placements. Soon she also starts walking slowly towards the door, followed by her two children and her audience of four parents. On her way out, Mrs. Durán says "*ahí nos vemos*!" ("see you soon!") and hugs Mrs. Gutiérrez when both reach the door, in a gesture that seems to soften the tension resulting from their earlier interactions.

Parent Organizing: The First Steps

Within days, a parent committee was formed to discuss the math issues and placements, and preparatory meetings were held. Two weeks later, at a meeting called and attended by many of the school's Latino families with the support of the school principal, a small group of math and science teachers explained—with the help of a bilingual teacher—the reasons for having two different levels of math with segregated students. In turn, many of the parents in attendance described how they perceived this as a separated and discriminatory system, to which the teachers responded by promising to reassess their practice to facilitate access for all students to more challenging curricula and opportunities for increased learning. The parents accepted the teachers' suggestions but asked them to meet again the following month to assess their progress, which was accepted by all. Interviewed after the meeting, Mrs. Durán, now firmly involved in the math discussions, explained the importance of the issues at stake.

> Now all the parents realize that without a good math [foundation], our children will fail in high school, they just won't have a chance, so here it gets decided how well they'll do in the future.

Mr. Sotelo, who was clearly impressed with the emerging negotiating skills of his fellow participants at the parents' group, expanded on the strategic aspects of the process as he assessed the balance of power among the school's critical stakeholders.

> We are much stronger together; now we ask the teachers for information as a group, and it is much harder to ignore us….I think it is also better for the teachers, because they see our interest and can explain their ideas to us all at once.

As a result of the initial interactions, the meetings between parents and teachers became a bimonthly occurrence at North Side, which eased tensions and misgivings on both sides and helped open the doors to more challenging learning for an increasing number of Latino students at the school. It also promoted a more assertive presence of Latino immigrant families in the North Side school community which, according to many of the teachers, increased the students' sense of pride and joint accountability, reflecting positively on their academic performance.

Stephen Jones, the school principal, believes that the efforts of the school's families increased communication and mutual understanding between math and science teachers and the mobilized parents. He reflected on the process in the following manner:

These parents were rightly concerned about their children's performance, because we needed to clarify how these placements were put in place. After some initial tension, I believe all sides were able to better accommodate to each other and that helped students be better represented with better instruction. I think that was a factor on the kids doing better in these subjects, and it was an education for all of us.

Partly due to these parent-inspired changes, later that year three Latino students were, for the first time, included in North Side's Honor Roll, an unprecedented achievement for this emerging community at the school.

The Math Placement Issue: Challenging Exclusion at the School

Through their high level of engagement in the math placement challenge at North Side Middle School, the parent activists transformed the concerns of Mrs. Gutierrez into a communal quest for information and a call for collective action. In the process, they realized the relevance of the issues involved in the math controversy, as well as their own lack of information regarding placement and teaching criteria at the school. Their deliberations and their joint strategies, as well as the clarity of their demands as they shared their concerns with the math teachers, led them into a deeper discussion about how the school system is organized, who decides what is taught to their children, under what criteria those decisions are made, and who ultimately may benefit from unequal opportunities. Before the first meeting with teachers, Mr. Torres, a father of a seventh grader, ventured his own theory about curricular and placement decisions:

> I don't know who decides what type of math the children will study, but I heard that that it is decided by people at the district, other times people at a university…what is sure is that we need to call the teachers to clarify it to us so we can understand it and help our children learn better. This is a public school, and all children should have a chance.

Mr. Torres' comments were followed by comments from other parents, who posed different ideas and theories about what institutions or individuals actually decided curriculum and placements in schools. At the end of the discussion, all agreed that their children's teachers and the school principal probably had some critical bearing on these decisions and that they were the first ones who needed to address their concerns.

Throughout their deliberations, there was also an emergence of new voices that had not been heard in past meetings, including the comments of three *abuelos* (grandparents) in attendance. One of them was Griselda Montaño, a matronly presence at her 68 years of age, who was excited about the opportunity

she had to let a teacher in attendance know of her granddaughter's deep disappointment over the perception that her science project had not been taken seriously or fairly graded:

> I told her teacher about how much dedication my granddaughter put into that project and how proud she was the night before she brought it to school, and then how sad she felt when it was returned to her without any comments and with a low grade. After that, my granddaughter told me she didn't even like coming to school anymore, she was really demoralized. The teacher needed to know what happened, and at the meeting she promised to have a conversation with her and to review her project again. **That was so important to me!**

Mrs. Montaño also added, with a proud grin, that it was the first time she had ever spoken at a meeting, or even publicly at all beyond the confines of her home.

> I am used to talking to my children and grandchildren all the time, but never in public, but then the teachers and the principal were really listening to us, and the other parents made me feel strong and motivated to speak.

Months later, North Side's school principal, Mr. Jones, would echo Mrs. Montaño's reflections as he recalled the math placements' deliberation process with the following comments:

> I know that the conversation about math and science initiated by the Latino parents really helped the school hear directly from them; some of it may have been frustration and some of it miscommunication, but it definitely made us more aware of these students' needs and challenges and of their parents' true appreciation for education.

Parent Empowerment and a Challenging Stance

Guadalupe Valdés (1996) wrote a critical portrayal of school institutions where Latino immigrant parents were often expected by school personnel to assume a subordinate position. She described how, in the views of many educators, parents were expected to quietly visit their children's classrooms during school functions, accept the teacher's prescriptions without question, and passively support their decisions. In contrast to that image and throughout their process of engagement, the parent activists at North Side offered a very different picture of Latino families and their changing relationship to schools. This was a group of concerned and increasingly organized parents attempting to understand and later challenge entrenched school practices, expecting to assert

their right to obtain the institutional information they deserved, and ready to change a status quo they perceived as being discriminatory towards their children. Throughout this process, the parent-activists developed a willingness and the ability to inquire in-depth about established school practices, while collectively articulating a disposition to transform them.

During their process of deliberations and decision-making, the Latino parents at North Side also began to articulate their unique modes of participation and independence, as well as an emerging disposition toward self-determination, well exemplified by the inclusive manner in which they strategized before their meeting with school personnel. At a preparatory session, Mrs. Durán, a leading parent volunteer at the school, proposed that the parents prepare a list of 10 questions that they wanted addressed by the math teachers. She explained her suggestion to her peers in the following terms:

> I think that if we prepare these questions beforehand, we can decide which are the most important ones, that way we won't forget anything or confuse ourselves, and it is going to be easier for the teachers to answer.

At this point (I was observing and taking notes about the meeting), I was asked by a parent (Mr. Sotelo) if I could help them prepare their questions. I suggested that I would rather help them review the questions once a smaller committee of parents had selected and discussed them. As several parents nodded in approval, they proposed to schedule an additional, smaller meeting within the following days when the list of questions would be generated and discussed. The parents also agreed to provide me with the questions for review immediately after their meeting. Then, Mr. Sotelo added a relevant observation with a confident smile:

> Pablo, we wouldn't give you the questions for your approval, they are **just for your review.**

And with that friendly note of caution, their message of independence—as well as their newly found disposition towards parent empowerment—came across loud and clear.

From Indignation to Critical Collaboration

The emerging parent empowerment process at North Side Middle School, however localized and small in scale, was indicative of a larger and increasingly significant trend towards broader public engagement by communities that have traditionally been underserved by public schools (Orr & Rogers, 2011; Warren, 2011). This trend was also reflected among the Latino parents at North Side, where their disposition towards parent activism and school engagement was clearly galvanized throughout the math placement controversy.

Their increasingly assertive interactions with school personnel and their own discovery process provided their parent group with a trigger event, in this case the math placement challenge. Their sense of collective injustice, what Paulo Freire (1994) would call their pedagogy of indignation, provided the spark that helped these families mobilize beyond their informal meetings. The importance of this event is that it triggered a qualitative change in consciousness among these parents, energizing their organizing activities, motivating a collective assessment of the school's internal balance of power, and helping them formulate joint strategies to address the perceived discriminatory practices affecting their children's schooling.

Conceptualizing their math placement challenge and all their related meetings as trigger events can help us understand how these junctures engaged the participants with previously private and buried levels of discontent. In the context of the Latino parent meetings at North Side, the math placement controversy created the conditions needed for the parents to articulate an existing, latent sense of injustice and frustration with established school policies. Woliver (1992) describes trigger events such as this one as "segmentary and reticulate" (p. 153), meaning that they are particular moments of significant interactions that remain in the collective memory as a *net* of occurrences that are symbolic of larger, unequal relations of power. In the context of North Side and in the views of the parents, the math placement controversy was symbolic of the unequal interactions between them and the school's teachers, clearly exemplified in the following narrative from Mrs. Ramos. She is an active parent at North Side, who shared during the initial parent meeting one of her frustrating moments when interacting with school personnel. She described her encounter with one of her son's teachers in the following terms:

> The teacher always offered to help, but when I started asking why this or why that, or when I told her what I really wanted to know, that I wanted to find out how things were really going in the school for my son, then she didn't like it, she complained to the principal that I was questioning her ability as a teacher.

Disappointing experiences between teachers and parents can accumulate over time and become a negative marker of the gap between low-income families and schools. They often encapsulate the frustrations, the hopes, and the struggles of marginalized families and communities as they interact with their local schools. These experiences can have the dual potential of either preventing a healthier relationship between parents and schools or—as it happened throughout this whole process—of forging common bonds of solidarity and action that can significantly *improve* the school climate.

At the individual level, their activism was felt by most of the parents with a palpable sense of urgency, transformation, and—ultimately—empowerment at the heart of their process of discovery and through their interactions with the school personnel. These feelings were galvanized as Mrs. Gutiérrez decided to share and problematize (Shor, 1993) her outrage over a perceived act of injustice impacting the community's children, transforming her indignation into a collective quest for change within the safety of her familiar community of parents. Her fellow parents, in turn, responded with what Hargraves and Fullan (1998) call "going deeper"(p. 67) in their commitment, that is, defining and reflecting on the issues involved and the long-term educational implications that restricting access to quality learning could have for their children's future, assessing the school context as well as the possible responses of school personnel, while engaging collectively in a disposition to change the situation.

As a result of the math placement process and the regular meetings held since then by all stakeholders at North Side, ultimately a closer relationship developed between parents and teachers. Over time and as both sides overcame their initial reservations, the meetings helped established a positive dialogue between them that promoted closer cooperation and an emerging partnership which enhanced the children's schooling and generally improved the school climate for all students. Mrs. Ramos summarized the feelings of many of the participating parents about the closer cooperation between Latino parents and teachers at North Side with the following reflections:

> By attending the meetings, I learned to understand the frustrations of the teachers and about the importance of supporting the children together. We need to have more communication with the teachers, because sometimes our own children don't treat them with a lot of respect, and then, when the teachers react, the children come and tell us that they were mistreated. But we have to be in the school to see those things, and in that sense these meetings really helped me.

Mrs. Ramos' empathy and understanding towards the teachers' needs and challenges at North Side indicate a remarkable attitudinal change in the parents' disposition, departing from a sense of alienation from the school and moving towards critical collaboration with the teachers. The parents' emerging awareness of the needs—and at times the struggles—of the different actors in the school community became the basis for a more equal collaboration between parents and teachers at the school. According to the parents' testimonies, their increased participation at the school helped increase their empathy towards their children's teachers, as they better understood the constraints of their work and their daily struggles. Mrs. Gutiérrez, the leading voice in the math placement issue, reflected on this aspect of the process in the following terms:

Thanks to the meetings we had with the teachers, I began to understand the work of the teachers and, sometimes, their frustrations and how important it is to work with them to help the children.

Mrs. Gutiérrez's reflections confirmed that the parents' committed, strategic activism became a deciding factor in establishing a more inclusive and mutually beneficial partnership with their children's teachers. The parents' mobilization around the math placement issue, and particularly the regular parent–teacher meetings held afterwards, opened additional avenues for family–school collaborations, including the creation and institutionalization of participatory structures within the school. Among these new avenues of engagement, the participants cited: the creation of an inclusive Multicultural Parents' Council, which was to meet on a quarterly basis to discuss schoolwide issues and plans; the formalization of daily parent visits to classrooms to observe and support teacher-led activities; increased parent engagement in extracurricular activities; and the translation to various languages of all materials and proceedings that required parental participation at the school. Based on our interviews, involved teachers, parents, and students in the school community think positively of these initiatives, and although the permanence of these changes is still an open question, they believe that they have clearly helped improve educational opportunities at North Side, enhancing the school climate for all students.

Lessons From the Families at North Side

The activist engagement of Latino families at North Side Middle School had a significant effect in the school community. It was a process that involved a remarkable challenge to entrenched educational practices that the parents perceived as exclusionary towards their children, and while intended to address an immediate need for equalized access to challenging curriculum, it also engaged all participants in a larger reflection about equity in education, decision making in society, and the power of organized parent solidarity. In the process, it also helped establish a stronger and more equal partnership between the parents, their children's teachers, and the school administrators, ultimately resulting in improved educational opportunities for all students at the school.

The math placement challenge examined in this study was the central issue that fueled the families' activism at the school, followed by other pivotal moments such as their critical parent–teacher meetings about student placements and the changing interactions between the participants and school personnel. The increased parent engagement throughout this process provided valuable opportunities for the families to develop and exercise a new disposition of independence and an increased appreciation for the value of education

as the primary tool towards a brighter future for their children. To effect actual change, the parent activists bonded through their common, often disappointing, prior experiences with the school and used their meetings as opportunities to share their feelings and as a basis to engage in serious deliberations and effective planning. Through this process, an alternative and more hopeful vision of schooling emerged, populated with better opportunities for their children and infused with a stronger sense of fairness, respect, compassion, and collaboration in their interactions with school personnel. In this context, the families also demonstrated the potential of local parent organizing in equalizing their children's access to higher quality instruction in an environment where teachers and administrators became increasingly open to *empowered* parent engagement and more responsive to interactions that were focused on improving school achievement for all students. This experience also points to what is often a condition for any meaningful interactions between families and schools to take place: that concerned parents not be seen as threats to established school norms or to the perceived power status of teachers and administrators. Rather, the many positive outcomes of this process emphasize the value of welcoming parents at the education table as indispensable, knowledgeable, and contributing partners in the schooling of their children.

The effects of the process of parent organizing at North Side were felt during the following years, increasing the levels of diverse parent participation at the school and, according to teachers and families, helping improve academic achievement among Latinos and other underserved student populations at the school. However, the prospect of a sustained effort towards parent activism at the school as a long-term proposition is less clear at this point in the process. The permanence of the parent mobilization at the school will certainly depend on the ability of the parent activists to invite participation from the incoming students' families, as well as on the willingness of teachers and administrators to institutionalize the families' presence in the school community. Additionally, the process at North Side showed that informed, inclusive, and respectful dialogue and engagement among students, teachers, parents, and administrators is a solid foundation to improve schooling at the local level, helping transition students and their families from a sense of indignation and disengagement toward meaningful avenues for educational collaboration.

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A Case for Increasing Empirical Attention to Head Start's Home-Based Program: An Exploration of Routine Collaborative Goal Setting

Patricia H. Manz, Jaana Lehtinen, and Catherine Bracaliello

Abstract

Collaborative goal setting among home visitors and family members is a mandate for Head Start's home-based program. Yet, a dearth of research is available for advancing evidence-based practices for setting and monitoring home visiting goals or for understanding how family characteristics or program features are associated with them. With the intent of stimulating empirical attention to this pivotal objective in Head Start's home-based program, this study explored a home-based Head Start program's routine practices for identifying and monitoring goals. In addition, the interrelationship of demographic characteristics and home visiting frequency with goal activity was examined. Findings from this explorative study indicated that goal identification occurred for slightly more than half of the families. Additionally, goals were largely adult focused. Goal attainment occurred at a low frequency. For the most part, family demographics were unrelated to goal activity. However, higher home visiting frequency was associated with increased goal setting. Emanating from this study are implications for practice as well as for future research.

Key Words: Head Start, early childhood home visiting, home-based program, visits, visitors, goals, collaborative goal setting, family, families, parents, caregivers, child-centered, child, adult, outcomes, services, poverty, preschoolers

Introduction

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start stands as a model, two-generational program for providing early childhood education to young children who live in poverty (Love, Chazan-Cohen, & Raikes, 2007). Founded on an ecological developmental perspective, Head Start strives to improve developmental and educational outcomes for low-income children by enhancing proximal contexts: home and preschool. Head Start provides direct services to children while at the same time it supports family members in parenting children. To this end, Head Start provides comprehensive services to promote children's development, education, and health through two program components: home-based and center-based. Home visiting, the primary venue of service delivery for Head Start's home-based program component, is commonly directed toward supporting caregivers' capacity for parenting as well as for addressing young children's developmental and educational needs.

Head Start's Performance Standards for the home-based program mandate that home visitors engage caregivers in establishing and monitoring collaborative goals (1306.33(b); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.), underscoring the pivotal role of goals in effective service delivery. Bailey (1987) defined collaborative goal setting in early education services as professionals and families joining together to identify goals and the means for achieving them. Further, collaborative goal setting should include processes for empowering family members to prioritize concerns, garner supports, and engage in early childhood services.

Although mandated, empirical attention to the practices and outcomes associated with collaborative goal setting in home-based programs is lacking. Sufficient data-based information concerning the connection of family, home visitor, and program characteristics to goal setting is unavailable. Additionally, the process and benefits associated with goal setting and monitoring in home visiting are unknown. Despite the lack of research specifically directed to collaborative goal setting in Head Start's home-based program, some recent findings from the broader field of home visiting suggest that goals can be crucial for achieving child outcomes and sustaining families' participation.

Emerging research indicates that the focus of home visiting session content is important for achieving child outcomes. As Head Start programs are based upon a two-generational approach, services in the home-based program can appropriately focus on the direct needs of the child in addition to supporting caregivers' capacity for parenting and enriching the home environment. Although this dual focus in Head Start is ultimately aimed toward enhancing children's development and learning, research has demonstrated that child

development focused, compared to adult focused, home visiting was more strongly associated with child outcomes. In a national evaluation of Early Head Start, an extension of Head Start's home-based services to children below the age of 3 years, Raikes and colleagues (Raikes et al., 2006) examined the proportion of time that was dedicated to child development concerns during home visiting sessions and its association with children's outcomes. Across the 17 programs that participated in the Early Head Start evaluation, the average amount of time home visitors reported as dedicated to child development concerns was about 57%, whereas the remaining time was spent on adult-oriented concerns (about 28%) and relationship building. At the conclusion of Early Head Start services, the three-year-old children whose home visiting had more attention to child development content showed the greatest developmental gains.

Complementary to Raikes et al.'s (2006) findings, a meta-analysis conducted by Sweet and Appelbaum (2004) also indicated that home visiting programs designed to primarily support the adult caregivers produced minimal benefits to children. These authors hypothesized that the enhanced concentration on personal concerns may have unintentionally diverted caregivers' attention away from child related matters.

In addition to maximizing child outcomes, child development focused home visiting appears to correspond with caregivers' sustained participation in home visiting programs. In a detailed examination of families who discontinued Early Head Start services, Roggman and colleagues (Roggman, Cook, Peterson, & Raikes, 2008) found an association of program dropout to home visit content. Among families who sustained their participation in Early Head Start, home visits were focused on children, including the active engagement of the child in activities or the provision of child development information to caregivers. On the other hand, families who discontinued services participated in home visits which were largely focused on adult or family needs. Further supporting the connection between child development focus and families' sustained participation, McCurdy and colleagues (McCurdy et al., 2006) demonstrated that caregivers of young children who presented with health risk factors or with an identified disability were more likely to participate in home visiting services than caregivers of children with no health concerns or developmental risk.

Evidence for the benefits of a child development emphasis in home visiting services directed toward infants and toddlers allows for a reasonable expectation that such an emphasis would also enhance the effectiveness of promoting development and school readiness in home-based programs for preschool age children, such as Head Start. Yet, there is no research available to date to support this expectation. With the intention of directing future empirical efforts,

this exploratory study was undertaken as a means of illuminating the natural goal setting processes of a home-based Head Start program. Several aspects of the program's approach to goal activity were noted, including the frequency and content of the goals set and accomplished as well as the interrelationship of demographics and home visiting frequency to goal setting. One important objective of this study addressed differences between the Head Start families who established goals and those who did not. These two groups were examined to discern demographic differences as well as differences in home visiting frequency. A second objective was to explore connections between demographic characteristics and the number of goals set. Lastly, the predictive relationships of home visiting frequency to goals set and accomplished were examined.

Methods

Child and Family Participants

Seventy-three children and their caregivers who were enrolled in a Head Start program participated in this study. Table 1 presents the demographic information for these participants as assigned to one of two categories: families with goals identified and those without identified goals. Consistent with the Head Start program from which these children were recruited, the sample of children in this study were largely ethnic minority, with the greatest representation of Latino children. However, the majority of children were English speaking; this is true for those children whose caregivers identified goals (91%) and for those whose families did not identify goals (87%). For the most part, children in this sample had been enrolled in the Head Start program for longer than six months (100% of caregivers with identified goals; 89% of caregivers without identified goals). Like the Head Start program at large, mothers were most frequently participating in the home visits (98% of caregivers with identified goals; 87% of caregivers without identified goals). About half of the parents had a high school diploma, and nearly 70% were unemployed. About 60% of the participants were single parents.

This sample was obtained from a Head Start program serving children in a region that includes small cities (populations around 100,000) as well as rural communities. Home visits were provided by 31 Family Partners. With one exception, all Family Partners were female. Family Partners ranged from 24 to 57 years in age (M = 39; SD = 8.14). All had a minimum of a high school education, although slightly more than half (52%) had some degree of post-secondary education. On average, these Family Partners had been employed by the Head Start Program for about four years (M = 3.72 years; SD = 4.31); however the range of years with the program spanned from two months to

15 years. Home visits were provided in the language preferred by each family (English or Spanish).

As the measures included in this study were collected program wide, all children and their families were eligible to participate. Information concerning the child and family characteristics, home visiting goals, and number of visits completed was extracted from the children's files. The enrollment packet, Family Partnership Agreement, and home visiting logs were culled for this information. Complete information was available for 73 families. Post-hoc determination indicated adequate statistical power (0.76) for this sample size (α = 0.05).

Measures

Home visiting goals were extracted from the Family Partnership Agreement, a form that is used in Head Start programs nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The Family Partnership Agreement provides a format for the home visitor and caregiver to set adult or child oriented goals and to record progress throughout home visiting. The Family Partnership Agreements were reviewed by the principal investigator to determine the content and number of goals set as well as the recorded progress throughout a full year of home visiting. Goals were defined as child development focused if they were directed toward early learning or obtaining health or educational services for the child. Common child development goals were to enroll the child in kindergarten or to increase the frequency of reading to the child. Adult centered goals were those that were directed toward improving the caregiver's personal circumstances, often including education, employment, marital, or financial matters. The total number of child development and adult focused goals set as well as those goals that were accomplished were recorded for each child as indicators of home visiting content and progress.

Data Analysis

General descriptive analysis of the frequency, means, and standard deviations for goals set, goals accomplished, and home visiting frequency were conducted for the entire sample. Subsequently, the total sample was bifurcated into two subsamples: those who identified goals on the Family Partnership Agreement and those who did not identify any goals. To determine demographic differences between these two subsamples, chi square analysis was applied for most variables as they were categorical. Given the interval nature of the variable "children's age," discriminant analysis was applied. ANOVA was undertaken to discern mean differences in home visiting frequency for these two groups of families.

Table 1. Demographic and Program Variables

	Families With Goals Listed	Families Without Goals Listed
Child		
Age in months (M (SD))	49.4 (3.30)	49.2 (3.70)
Gender (%)*		
Female	52	29
Ethnicity (%)		
Latino	63	50
African American	20	41
Caucasian	17	9
Primary language (%)		
English	91	87
Spanish	9	13
Time enrolled in Head Start (%)*		
3 to 6 months	0	11
Greater than 6 months	100	89
Family		
Caregiver relationship to child (%)		
Mother	98	87
Father	2	7
Other		3
Education (%)		
Less than high school	23	38
High school	58	38
Post-secondary training or education	19	24
Employment (%)		
Full-time	19	16
Part-time	12	16
Unemployed	69	68
Family constellation (%)		
Two-parent	39	33
Single-parent	62	57
Blended		10
Number of siblings (M (SD))	1.81 (1.32)	1.86 (1.45)

* Significant difference between subsamples

Results

Descriptive Analysis for Goal Activity and Home Visiting

Slightly greater than half (n = 42; 57%) of this sample of Head Start families documented goals on the Family Partnership Agreement. Among the families who established goals, all but two families identified adult centered goals, which largely centered on broad educational or financial achievements (e.g., obtain GED, buy a home) or on improving their relationships with partners. A small portion of families (n = 16) identified child development goals. For the most part, the families who established child development goals were a subset of those who had also established adult centered goals (n = 14). Two families had only child development goals. Like the adult centered goals, child development goals were general in nature, focusing on enrolling children in kindergarten or increasing reading at home.

Among the 16 caregivers who established child development goals, half (n = 8) documented accomplishing a goal on the Family Partnership Agreement (See Figure 1). Half of the 12 caregivers who established a single goal accomplished it (n = 6). A similar pattern was noted for the four caregivers who established two goals; half accomplished both goals (n = 2) whereas the other half did not accomplish any child development goals. Among the 40 caregivers who established adult centered goals, the number of goals set ranged from one to five; however, most of these families set one goal (n = 22, 55%; see Table 2). Of these 40 families, 14 reported accomplishing goals, with the majority of these families reporting that one goal was accomplished regardless of the number set (n = 10; 71%; see Table 2).

Table 2. Adult Goals Set and Accomplished

Number of Goals	Goals Set (Total Number of Families Setting Goals = 40)	Goals Accomplished (Total Number of Families Accomplishing Goals = 14)
1	22	10
2	7	2
3	8	2
4	2	0
5	1	0

For the entire sample, the mean number of home visiting sessions that were completed during the school year was 6.7 (SD = 3.1), with a range of 2 to 22 visits (see Table 3). The mean frequency suggests that most families received a home visit every six weeks during the 40-week program year.
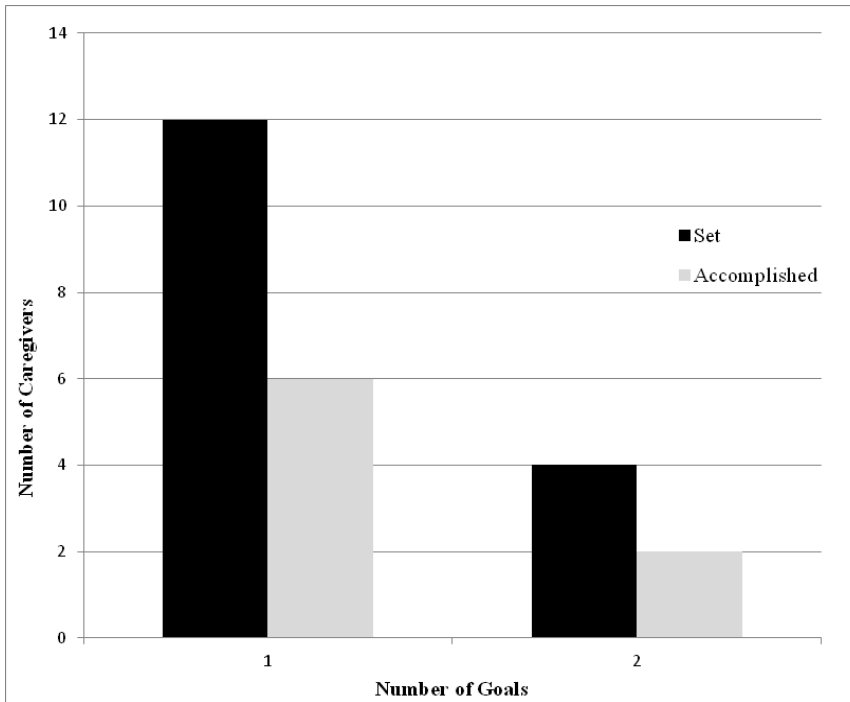
Figure 1. Child Development Goals Set and Accomplished

Examination of Demographic and Home Visiting Frequency in Bi-Furcated Sample

The total sample of participating families was divided according to whether or not they documented goals (child development and adult centered) on the Family Partnership Agreement. Demographic characteristics for each group, those with documented goals (n = 42) and those without documented goals (n = 31), were explored. No significant differences were found in the relationship of caregiver who received the home visits ($\chi^2(2)$ = 4.28, p = 0.11), children's home language ($\chi^2(1)$ = 0.20, p = 0.64), ethnicity ($\chi^2(2)$ = 2.34, p = 0.31), maternal education ($\chi^2(2)$ = 1.90, p = 0.38), maternal employment ($\chi^2(2)$ = 0.22, p = 0.89), family type ($\chi^2(2)$ = 2.59, p = 0.27), and number of siblings ($\chi^2(5)$ = 5.17, p = 0.39). Also, the ages of the children in both groups was not significantly different ($\lambda(1)$ = 0.99, p = 0.80). Gender differences emerged between the two groups; a higher proportion of girls were in the subsample of families who had identified goals ($\chi^2(1)$ = 9.95, p = 0.002).

Home visiting frequency for the two subgroups, families with documented goals and those without, was also explored. The mean home visiting frequencies for those families who established adult and child development goals versus those who did not establish any goals on the Family Partnership Agreement are

presented in Table 3. Results from the ANOVA demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the home visiting frequency for these two groups of families ($F(1, 71) = 16.82$, $p = 0.000$). Families who had documented goals on the Family Partnership Agreement received more home visits than those who did not.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Home Visiting Frequency

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total sample	6.71	3.12	2	11
Families with documented goals ($n = 42$)	7.88	3.26	2	22
Families without documented goals ($n = 31$)	5.13	2.10	2	22

Similarly, these subsamples differed in the amount of time they were enrolled in Head Start ($\chi^2(1) = 4.27$, $p = 0.03$). As seen in Table 1, all of the families who documented goals on the Family Partnership Agreement were enrolled for six months or longer. Although the majority of families who did not document goals also were enrolled for six months or longer, this subsample also had a portion of families who were enrolled less than six months.

Discussion

In light of the Head Start Performance Standards' mandate for home visitors to collaboratively establish goals with families, this study examined the routine goal activity in a Head Start program, with further inquiry into the relationships of demographic characteristics and home visiting frequency to goal setting and achievement. Since the methodology of this study was exploratory and based on an examination of a single program, the results should be interpreted with caution. Rather than drawing conclusions, the intent for this study was to increase empirical attention to the key activity of collaborative goal setting by using these preliminary findings as the basis for identifying future practice implications and research directions.

Child Development Focus

Although research on goal setting in home visiting is sparse, an emerging finding is that the focus of home visiting sessions is linked to the type of

outcomes achieved. Child development content appears to be a particularly important ingredient for home visiting programs that aim to benefit children's growth and early learning (McCurdy et al., 2006; Raikes et al., 2006; Roggman et al., 2008). Given this research, an important objective for Head Start's home-based program may be to ensure that ample time in home visits is dedicated to child development goals.

Although this study represents a snapshot of a select Head Start program, the findings suggest that when programs present only broad requirements for collaborative goal setting, child development goals may not be systematically identified and monitored. The proportion of child development goals among the participants in this study was very low. Nearly half of the caregivers did not have any type of goal documented on the Family Partnership Agreement. Moreover, among those who did have goals, only a small number included child development goals. The predominant focus for goals was on adult oriented needs, largely regarding finances, housing, or relationships. Only a small number of families identified child development goals, which were largely focused on broad objectives (e.g., enrollment in kindergarten) and not connected to immediate early learning activities.

Collaborative Goal Monitoring

As indicated on the Family Partnership Agreement, the rate of accomplishing the collaboratively derived goals was fairly low. Half of the caregivers who established child development goals reported accomplishing at least one or two goals. The rate of goal accomplishment was much less for the caregivers who identified adult oriented goals; about a quarter of these families accomplished a single goal. The fact that child development goals had a higher rate of accomplishment than adult oriented goals may correspond with research that underscores the importance of a child development focus for engaging and sustaining families in home visiting services (Raikes et al., 2006; Roggman et al., 2008). On the other hand, it may also reflect the extent to which the goals were attainable in a 40-week program year. The foci of the adult oriented goals in this program primarily concerned major adult accomplishments, like buying a home or completing an education certificate. Although child goals were broadly connected to early learning skills, they were more attainable during the program year (e.g., enrollment of child in kindergarten). One implication for practice is to provide training and a structure for home visitors so that they may consistently and routinely engage all caregivers in collaborative goal setting and specify goals that are attainable within the time and scope of the program's services.

Association With Home Visiting Frequency

In addition to associations with child outcomes, collaborative goal setting enhances families' participation in home visiting services. Several studies have demonstrated that caregivers' engagement in home visiting is sustained when the focus of services is on goals that are meaningful to them (McCurdy et al., 2006; Raikes et al., 2006; Roggman et al., 2008). Consistent with this research, this study found that both the mean frequency of home visiting and duration of enrollment were significantly higher among families who established goals on the Family Partnership Agreement relative to those who did not. However, this study was not designed to discern the direction of the relationship between these two indicators of sustained participation and goal setting. Thus, it is unknown if home visitor frequency or program sustainment led to goal formation or if there were qualities in the families or home visitors which related to collaborative goal setting as well as to these indicators of program engagement.

Association With Family Characteristics

This study is unique in examining associations among multiple family characteristics and collaborative goal setting. A prior study by Raikes and colleagues (2006), which reported that single-parent caregivers tended to spend less time on child oriented issues during home visits, may suggest that formulating child oriented goals would be associated with family type. However, no associations between goal activity and family type were found in this study. In fact, only one variable, child gender, related to goal setting or attainment. Additional investigations are necessary to derive trends in demographic associations and their implications for practice.

Implications for Home Visiting Practices

Taken collectively, findings from this study illustrate the complexity of goal setting and accomplishment in the home visiting component of Head Start. These preliminary findings inspire suggestions for current practice as well as raise questions for future research for Head Start as well as other home visiting programs. With regard to practice, findings from this study highlight the importance of ensuring that goals are formulated and monitored through a collaborative process between home visitors and caregivers. Home visitors should guide caregivers to include goals which are focused on their children in addition to those aimed at improving parenting. Further, goals should be attainable within the scope of the program.

Integrating a structure for goal setting, monitoring, and accomplishment into home visiting may improve the effectiveness of the home-based component

of Head Start. Recent advancement of collaborative consultation models for the purpose of promoting development during the early childhood years provides a promising approach for goal setting and accomplishment in home visiting. Developed by Sheridan and colleagues (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010; Sheridan, Marvin, Knoche, & Edwards, 2008), the Getting Ready Intervention is a structured, home-based intervention for formulating partnerships between family members and Head Start teachers. Such partnerships enable them to collaboratively work towards formulating and achieving mutual goals for enhancing preschool children's school readiness. During a year-long series of home visits, educators and family members initially work towards formulating their relationship and attaining shared observations of the child. With these fundamental ingredients underway, caregivers and educators establish mutual goals for promoting the child's development. The focus of the collaboration is to provide the necessary support and resources for attaining the goal, monitoring the child's progress, and evaluating the child's progress in achieving the goal. A large-scale experimental evaluation of the Getting Ready Intervention involving over 200 children demonstrated its benefits to children's social development (Sheridan et al., 2010).

Although focused on caregiver–educator relationships, the Getting Ready Intervention offers a systematic process for attaining Head Start's mandate to formulate mutual goals in the home-based component. Extending this model to the home-based component of Head Start, home visitors can join teachers and family members in the collaborative process of formulating goals and monitoring progress towards them. In this three-way collaboration, the unique, dual position of home visitors provides a consistent individual to support goal-related activities as they occur in both the home and school/center contexts.

Implications for Future Research

Several broad research directions are indicated for enhancing the collaborative goal setting activity in Head Start's home-based program. On a fundamental level, this study should be replicated to acquire a rich understanding of the routine practices across a representative sampling of Head Start home-based programs. In addition, expanded study of the associations of goal activity to family, home visitor, and program characteristics would assist in formulating research and program development needs. Beyond studying routine practices as well as multivariate relationships with demographic and program qualities, research can serve to promote the integration of systematic processes for collaborative goal setting in the home-based program component. To this end, program development and evaluation should address issues related to home visitor's needs for professional development. Families' responsiveness

to systematic procedures for establishing and monitoring goals is crucial for ensuring their engagement. Lastly, the integration of a systematic process of collaborative consultation for goal identification and accomplishment should be empirically tested for the home-based component, delivered solely or in conjunction with the classroom-based program component.

Limitations

Although this exploratory study illuminates goal setting and attainment activity in a home-based Head Start program, there are several qualifications that restrict the generalizability of these finding to the larger Head Start community. The sample for this study was drawn from a single program and therefore may not be representative of the broader Head Start population. Likewise, the sample was not identified through experimental procedures, which prompts an additional caution about the generalizability of these results. This study relied upon the routine reporting in the Family Partnership Agreement as the means for identifying the goals that were set and achieved. In the absence of an integrity assessment of home visitors' report of goal setting and accomplishment, it is not certain that the Family Partnership Agreement was an accurate indicator of goal activities.

Concluding Comments

Acknowledging the qualifications, this exploratory study was intentionally undertaken to initiate research on an important yet relatively neglected component of Head Start programming. Apparent in the published literature is a strong research focus on the center-based program component of Head Start, while research on its home visiting services is lacking. Therefore, the unique contributions of the Head Start home visiting services are largely unknown at this point in time. As directions for enhancing Head Start continue to unfold in early childhood research and program evaluations, strategic study and development of the home services in combined Head Start programs can expand avenues for engaging and connecting families to their preschool children's education in preparation for entry into elementary school.

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Parent Empowerment: Connecting With Preservice Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

Parent empowerment includes the ability to meet the needs of one's family while feeling in control. This phenomenological study seeks to understand the experience of 71 parents of children with disabilities who participated with preservice teachers in a 16-week special education course between 2006 and 2010. Analysis of pre-course and post-course parent focus group transcripts resulted in four shifts in perceptions of parent–professional partnerships: (1) from judgmental and impersonal to caring professionals; (2) from intimidation to confidence; (3) from defensiveness to trusting professionals; and, (4) from despair to hope. Results demonstrated parents' perceived increase in self-efficacy in decision-making, access to resources, group affiliation, positive perception change, feelings of mutual respect, experience as a change agent, and hope (i.e., empowerment).

Key Words: parents, empowerment, children with disabilities, preservice teachers, partnerships, special needs, education, preparation, candidates, families

Introduction

Becoming a parent can be a time full of joy and anticipation. Prior to the birth of the baby, parents think about what the child will look like, the sports he or she will play, and whether the child will be a dancer or into theater. Maybe the new baby will even follow in the parents' footsteps. When the infant is

born, parents may not be fully prepared to take on the role of parenting. In the process of envisioning the "new family," the parent thinks about the child in terms of typical development; they do not generally plan to parent a child with special needs. When parents find themselves in this role, they often feel very unprepared, afraid, and angry. Parents have described this feeling as one of helplessness devoid of hope (Huang, Kellett, & St. John, 2010). The transition from feeling helpless and overwhelmed to believing in and acting on their ability to parent a child with special needs is an ongoing process for families (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Most parents require supports and resources to feel competent in parenting skills and to learn to advocate as part of parenting a child with special needs (Carpenter & Egerton, 2007).

Literature Review

Empowerment is the ability to seek control over one's life by taking action to get what one wants and needs. Empowerment involves increasing one's knowledge and skills and boosting motivation to achieve a desirable outcome, and it refers to a continuum of experiences that offer the individual opportunities to utilize his or her own competencies to learn new information and skills (Turnbull et al., 2006). Self-efficacy, one of the strongest measures of success, is the belief in one's ability to organize and carry out an action or task (Heslin & Klehe, 2006). In order for the process of empowerment to be effective, it must allow the individual time to practice new skills in a supportive environment to work toward new goals (Vig & Kaminer, 2003). Family empowerment has been defined as a family invested with authority (Morrow & Malin, 2004). It is the process of a family acquiring the skills, resources, authority, opportunity, and motivation to meet the needs of their family. Family empowerment is the action associated with high self-efficacy (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). Empowerment enables parents to achieve desired outcomes for their family and their children (Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

A parent's role in the education of a child with a disability is a unique one. In fact, Dunst and Dempsey (2007) propose that "the role of parents with a child with a disability shows a level of complexity and intensity not generally found in the general population" (p. 305). Due to the multifaceted role required of parents raising a child with a disability, educators should work to empower parents in these efforts (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Green et al., 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Pinkus, 2005; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). In order to define the construct of parent empowerment, it is essential to give attention to the characteristics that

make up this term. These characteristics across disciplines include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) playing an active role in the education and decision-making process; (b) receiving access to resources; (c) effecting change in one's life and/or community; (d) feeling part of a group or sense of belonging; (e) having a sense of self-efficacy; (f) experiencing hope; (g) changing perceptions and learning to think critically; and (h) receiving respect (Carpenter & Phil, 1997; Dunst, 2002; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009; Murray et al., 2007; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008; Summers et al., 2005).

Parent–Professional Partnerships and Empowerment

Research in the area of parent–professional partnerships and the impact of quality partnerships on parent empowerment is in its infancy (Stoner et al., 2005). According to Morrow and Malin (2004), partnership should be structured around an "equal division of power" (p. 164), which entails providing parents and professionals a shared role in decision-making that is built on respect (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Moreover, research concludes that parents are typically at a disadvantage when dealing with professionals (e.g., general and special education teachers, therapists, school psychologists, physicians, and administrators), and despite legislation that supports collaborative efforts between families and professionals, effective parent–professional partnerships remain out of reach (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Pinkus, 2005). Research supports the notion that professionals tend to blame parents for a child's educational failures as well as to view parents as needy and unprepared (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents often feel that the unique knowledge they possess about their child is underappreciated by professionals, and that professionals are more interested in the child's label than in providing personalized services (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). These issues unveil problematic power struggles which frequently lead to conflict between parents and professionals that could be avoided with appropriate planning and collaborative efforts (Staples & Diliberto, 2010; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Few research studies thoroughly discuss parent empowerment. However, it is widely recognized that a vital factor in empowerment is a sense of hope (Harnett, Tierney, & Guerin, 2009; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). Lloyd and Hastings (2009) evaluate the significance of hope in families with children with disabilities. Parents who view goals as attainable and who find ways to reach those goals had stronger hope agency (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). Hope agency is defined as "the perception that one can reach his or her goals" (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009, p. 957). Parents with strong hope agency experienced benefits that trickled down to their children, thus reducing problematic behaviors

and improving the overall quality of family life (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). The concept of increased hope agency in families of a child with a disability illuminates the notion that parents who participate in decision-making experience greater empowerment.

Dunst and Dempsey (2007) evaluated parenting competence, confidence, and enjoyment in families of a child with special needs. The study focused on relationships between parents and professionals as it related to parent empowerment and parent capabilities. Overall, the study concluded that the type of professional support received by the family impacts parental sense of control. Furthermore, the researchers stressed that the "operational indicators of family–professional partnerships are yet to be developed" (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 316), revealing that further research is needed to define the impact of effective parent–professional partnerships on parent empowerment.

Although some teacher preparation programs provide students with instruction in family involvement, most fall short of truly preparing teachers to successfully engage with families (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). This project represents an effort to not only provide preservice educators with hands-on family engagement experience but also to empower parents of children with disabilities to confidently fulfill their role in the parent–professional partnership in meaningful ways. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experience of parents of children with disabilities through participation as an embedded parent in a preservice special education teacher preparation course and its impact on parent empowerment.

Method

Setting

Faculty at a midsized Midwestern university collaborated with school districts and community agencies to design a course to provide training on effective parent–professional partnerships and collaboration for special education teacher candidates and parents of children with disabilities. The goals of the local school districts and community agencies (fetal alcohol prevention, disability, pediatric therapy) were to provide parent empowerment and to encourage parent engagement among families served. Districts and agencies paid a small stipend to the parents of children with disabilities to participate in this course. Upon completion of the course, the parents were expected to go out and use the information and skills they learned in the course to empower other parents of children with disabilities in their agency or district. Further, this course provided opportunities for parents and candidates to engage in collaborative relationships and partnerships.

The course, "Consultation and Collaboration with Families and Colleagues," is a required course for the special education teacher preparation program at both the undergraduate and graduate level and is offered every semester. The 3-credit hour course occurred over a 16-week semester and included a variety of large and small group discussions in which parents learned course content alongside students, participating as auditors in the course. Five to ten parents of children with disabilities were embedded in each section of the course with 25–35 candidates. The parents of children with disabilities in the course will be referred to as *embedded parents.* Parent participants were embedded in the course, attending all 3-hour weekly sessions, contributing to class discussions and content, but not required to complete course assignments. One parent was also selected to participate as a co-teacher of the course each semester, working closely with the professor on planning, instructing, grading, and formative evaluation of course components. The course also involved a 20-hour service learning component in which the preservice educators spent time with an assigned embedded parent in school, home, and community settings to gather insight into the family experience.

Course activities involved a variety of opportunities for embedded parents to interact with students. Up to four preservice enrollees were paired with each participating family and required to spend time outside of class with the family in a home, school, or and community setting. Students logged these hours and applied course concepts to the family through written reflections and a final paper on family characteristics related to the outside-of-class experience. The field experience included a culminating presentation of the students' experiences with the family throughout the course of the semester, presented in video and Power Point format to peers, school district representatives, agency personnel, and other community partners.

One course activity that proved especially significant to participant outcomes was the Virtual Family assignment. Embedded parents provided a written account of their family experience of the child's disability identification or journey to diagnosis to be presented anonymously to students. In class, one embedded parent was placed in a small group of students to read and reflect upon the Virtual Family. Presented as a case study to preservice teachers, this assignment required students to place themselves in the parents' shoes, virtually assuming the role of parent in the process of seeking answers to the child's challenges. After student reflection and small group discussion on the case, the parent of that Virtual Family case revealed their identity. This activity resulted in a series of interactive panels through which each parent related their family story, including identification of the child's disability, educational experiences, and involvement with child- and family-serving professionals.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Embedded Parents and Their Child(ren) with Disabilities

Parent Characteristics	(*n* = 71)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	4	5.6%
Female	67	94.3%
Marital Status		
Single	13	18.3%
Married/Partnered	58	81.6%
Age		
20–30	14	19.7%
31–40	35	49.2%
41–50	22	30.9%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	58	81.6%
African American	6	8.4%
Hispanic	6	8.4%
Other	1	1.4%
Highest Education Level		
HS/GED	40	56.3%
Bachelor's Degree	21	29.5%
Graduate Degree	10	14.0%
Child Characteristics [a]	(*n* = 76)	**Percentage**
Gender		
Male	56	73.6%
Female	20	26.3%
Age (range from 2–41 years)		
2–9	29	38.1%
10–12	26	34.2%
13 and up	21	27.6%
Disability Category		
Autism Spectrum Disorder	23	30.2%
Down Syndrome	12	15.7%
Multiple Disabilities	10	13.1%
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	6	7.8%
Learning Disability	6	7.8%
Mental Health Disorder	2	2.6%
Extreme Prematurity Resulting in Disability	2	2.6%
Genetic Disorder	2	2.6%
Cerebral Palsy	2	2.6%
Co-Occurring Disabilities	1	1.3%
Cystic Fibrosis	1	1.3%
Neurofibromatosis	1	1.3%
Diabetes	1	1.3%
Joubert Syndrome	1	1.3%
PANDAS Syndrome	1	1.3%
Rett Syndrome	1	1.3%
Sensory Processing Disorder	1	1.3%
Spina Bifida	1	1.3%
Williams Syndrome	1	1.3%
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	1	1.3%

[a] Several parents reported characteristics of more than one child with a disability.

Participants

Embedded parents were selected by the collaborating agency based on their individual agency's criteria (e.g., county of residence, child's disability category, eligibility for agency services) for participation in the course. Parents were paid a stipend by the collaborating school district or agency: $50 per class or $800 per semester to defray transportation and child care costs.

Embedded parent demographics were collected over four years (2006–2010). Respondents (n = 71) provided information on personal characteristics as well as characteristics of their child or children with a disability (n = 78; see Table 1). Demographic data for parents who participated in more than one cohort were counted only once, with all duplicated data removed from final counts.

Design and Procedures

Focus groups were conducted with all embedded parent participants each semester before the start of the 16-week course and again during the final week of the course. All focus groups took place in classrooms at the university and were audiotaped. Both pre-course and post-course focus group discussions continued until each topic was exhausted, with focus groups consisting of the 4–10 embedded parents for that semester's course. The duration of the focus groups lasted between one and two hours for both pre- and post-course discussions. The focus groups were conducted by the first author, who disclosed that she was a parent of a child with a disability, and by an outside individual trained in qualitative research who was also a parent of a child with a disability. One central research question was used to guide both pre- and post-course focus groups: How does an embedded parent experience contribute to empowerment and self-efficacy as a partner in the parent–professional relationship? The nature of phenomenological research dictates that data remain somewhat fluid, allowing respondents' perspectives to emerge upon analysis (Groenewald, 2004). Subquestions evolved in an effort to develop an understanding of parents' feelings before and after participation as an embedded parent in the course.

In the pre-course focus group, embedded parents were prompted to describe their experiences related to the guiding research questions. Questions asked of participants included:
- What types of experiences have you had working with professionals who provide services to children with disabilities in your community?
- What are the most important qualities in a professional with whom you have had a positive experience?

- How do you feel about working with professionals who provide services to children with special needs and their families?
- How do you think expectations for partnership may differ between parents and professionals?
- What do you hope to gain from participation as an embedded parent in the course?

The post-course focus group questions provided parents with an opportunity to reflect on the embedded parent experience. In order to revisit the essential research questions, focus group facilitators asked the following questions:

- Before this class, how did you feel about working with professionals who provide services to children with special needs and their families?
- Thinking back over your experiences in this class, was there a time when you realized that your values, beliefs, or expectations about parent–professional partnerships had changed?
- What made you aware that a change had occurred?
- How will the change impact you as the parent of a child with a disability?
- How do you think expectations for partnership may differ between parents and professionals?
- What did you get out of this class?

Data Analysis

In order to assess parents' attitudes toward parent–professional relationships before the course began, the first author and an outside parent trained in qualitative research asked pre-course focus group questions that allowed participants to freely discuss their experiences with professionals as well as positive and negative qualities of professional partners in general. Analysis of that portion of findings resulted in subthemes that are not relevant to post-course focus group findings, as embedded parents were not asked to reflect on these general experiences after participation in the course.

The authors used thematic analysis of focus group data to guide this phenomenological study, a design in which researchers examine the perspectives of people involved to make sense of social or psychological phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). As described by Creswell (2007), phenomenological data analysis consists of horizontalization (highlighting significant statements) then organization of statements into themes. In this study, transcripts of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Two researchers not connected with the study independently conducted an initial analysis of data by generating codes related to parent empowerment in an effort to combine and categorize the data. From these categories, patterns related to parent empowerment

were identified and assertions that pulled together the patterns found in the data were developed. Significant participant statements provided insight into the central research question and/or subquestions. These statements or quotes were then clustered into groups of meaning, resulting in a series of pre-course and post-course themes. The separate analyses of the two additional researchers who did not participate in data collection helped ensure inter-rater reliability. Consensus was reached by both sets of researchers on themes for pre-course and post-course focus groups. The authors sought to discover how the embedded parent experience influenced parent perspectives toward professionals, parent–professional partnerships, and themselves as change agents.

Major Themes

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to see the issue from the participants' point of view and reveal the meaning of, in the case of this study, the embedded parents' experience of empowerment (Groenewald, 2004). Both pre-course and post-course focus group transcripts revealed the experience of empowerment and growth as parent–professional partners. The findings are outlined here as they relate to four themes: (1) From judgmental and impersonal to caring professionals: Parents believed that the connection with preservice teachers contributed to personalization of all involved; (2) From intimidation to confidence: Parents felt that course participation increased their confidence in partnering with professionals and in attaining appropriate services for their child; (3) From defensiveness to trusting professionals: Parents sensed growth in their perceptions of professionals and in preservice educators' perceptions of parents; and, (4) From despair to hope: Parents were encouraged and hopeful for future positive parent–professional partnerships. Each theme is presented with supporting statements from parents in pre- and post-course focus group sessions describing the transformation in parents' views on parent–professional partnerships. (Note: italics within quotations indicate the speaker's emphasis.)

Theme 1: From Judgmental and Impersonal to Caring Professionals

Before the course, a strong sentiment emerged from parents that they wished that teachers were more willing and able to see parents and children with disabilities as people rather than tasks. A parent stated more generally that, "I think that it is important to bond as humans. It's always good to know that you are not alone in this. It's very important." Another parent added, "If people feel wanted and feel like they are a special person no matter what, then that would be a good thing."

The pursuit of personalization in the process of parent–professional partnering appeared to become a reality for participating parents. Upon reflection, they believed that students in the course, who could potentially be their child's future teacher, truly understood parents through their experiences with the embedded parents throughout the 16-week course.

> Today, when we were doing our Virtual Family and they were asking me questions about what I did in certain situations, two of my group members started crying because they felt what I felt and went through in that situation. That, to me, was just like the "wow factor." I just couldn't believe that they had gotten themselves that attached to it.

> I think it happened, it was probably about the third time they [preservice educators] came to our house. It was as relaxed as possible. There was dog hair everywhere, there were crumbs everywhere, there were dirty clothes everywhere, you know? It was, if you're going to see me, if you're going to see our family, you're going to see it warts and all. But, they got it…they could understand what it was like to live in our shoes a little bit more.

Perhaps more salient to parents is the need for a personalized experience for professionals in viewing the child with a disability. Pre-course statements regarding negative experiences with professionals often centered on the child being viewed as his or her label rather than as a unique individual, worthy of being included in all educational activities.

> We go for an open house, and again, this is our first time, our first experience with the school system. We're out of preschool and transitioning into primary school. My son can read his name at this point, he knows his name, and we go down to the typical classroom where he is supposed to be and all the kids have a name on their desk and he's going by, looking for it, looking for it, and he can't find his name anywhere. We get in line to talk to the teacher, and we get up to her and she's like, "Oh, he's down in the special education room. He'll only be coming down here once in a while." There were plenty of empty ones. She could have put a name tag on one to make him feel welcome. That was what it was all about. He wasn't welcome to his own open house. That was a terrible, terrible feeling.

Parents sensed long-term implications for society due to circumstances in which the child was not valued.

> If you don't include them [children with disabilities], then all the other people never know how to react to them either. So, when he finally does

get into the community as an adult, they're like, "Well, I don't know how to talk with him. I don't know what to do."

When asked what a quality professional would do to better include a child with a disability, one parent replied, "Just give it a try. I always thought if we could just get in there [sports team], they'll see. They'll know. He's not an alien; he's a boy."

In direct contrast to this mother's sense of estrangement, several parents reported post-course that due to the course, they believed that the preservice teachers would emerge from the course more able to view the child as a person with individual, human characteristics and a name other than a disability label: "…another thing we talked about in class too, was looking at the child as a child having a disability, not, 'This is Autism.'" Parents also shared a sense of relief that person-first language became more than a construct to the preservice educators because of interaction with the children themselves inside the family home and in the community. This parent's post-participation quote uses the term "we" when referring to person first and how it translates into classroom practice among parents and professionals working together as a team.

> And you [another parent] mentioned the person first. That was a big change in the class when the students went from the disability came first, and then they mentioned the student. I think now students all have a bigger understanding of person first. It's not the disability we're looking at, it's the person, and then we look at what things we need to put in place to accommodate the disability.

Before the course began, parents reflected that it is difficult to view professionals as people outside of the realm within which there is contact, because most interaction occurs in relation to the professional's job. The parent–professional relationship is often based solely on the educational or therapy experience, separate from the family, community, and societal roles each also enacts.

> The professionals—we [parents] don't want them to have *stuff*. We want them to be professional and supportive and beyond human in a way, and not have little issues, per say. And sometimes I think they do, and they fall short of our expectations, and then we become very disappointed, and we take that with us when we deal with other professionals.

Post-course focus group discussions revisited the parents' notion of the professional as a person with experiences outside of the workplace. After having contact with pre-emerging professionals in class, one parent cited that a great benefit of participation was "…that I'd be more willing to look for that human side to the professional, because sometimes you want them to be more than

human." Similarly, another parent recognized the need for parents and professionals to know one another more intimately in order for parent–professional relationships to prosper.

> So your only contact with them [professionals] as a parent is that professional and sometimes you do need to see them as people. They have kids, too. They get sick, they have good days, they have bad days…it's a good thing to invest in getting to know them.

This quote reflects that parents felt that their willingness to observe the professional in a more personal light had enlarged due to the contact they had with students in the course.

Theme 2: From Intimidation to Confidence

Prior to the course, many parents felt that the caregiver's role in the parent–professional relationship should be that of partner, but had experienced barriers to partnership limited by the professionals' inability to see parents as willing and/or able contributors.

> No matter what the professional brings to it, if the parents themselves don't feel comfortable and feel like they are a part of it, then it doesn't work as well. They have to actually feel it. They have to make the parents feel that they are a part of the team and feel like what they have to say is important. They have to feel that the child is just as important to them as it is to the parent.

Often pre-course focus group participants reported a lack of full participation in decisions related to their child's educational or medical care, citing a superior attitude of professionals or environmental factors in meetings that set parents up for unequal partnership.

> When I was in fostering, I had to go to this training on IEPs and stuff, and the trainer said, "You know, if you feel out of place because everybody has a M.D. or Ph.D. behind their names, write M.O.M. or D.A.D. behind yours."

One parent discussed her child's initial IEP meeting, saying that the manner in which the meeting began left her feeling

> …intimidated. Because at his first meeting, I was the only one there; I didn't have my husband with me.…They were all seated, and then I walked in. And that was a big thing. And they all had their papers in front of them. I had my purse, you know. I didn't have a clue…each person went around the table, and they were very, you know, the professional. They were telling me what my son wasn't going to do, cannot do,

probably would not do, you know. And they had it all planned out in their own professional mind.

However, after the course, parents felt that learning more about special education law, the history of disabilities in America, experiences of other parents, and qualities of effective parent–professional partnerships better equipped them to participate in decisions for their child. "I think I didn't feel as confident then as I do now. I feel more confident about approaching school situations…knowledge is power, and we shared so much knowledge, and I feel like I could be more confident." Not only had parents gleaned specific information to inform their decisions, they also reported increased ability to communicate information as it related to their child's services. "And I feel like I know how to talk to them [professionals] a little bit more intelligibly about things too, you know?"

> I've only had two IEP meetings, and just from this class, I've learned that I can ask for things. I can do a lot more with the IEP than I thought I could. That has definitely helped me out personally, and will help me out in the future.

Pre-course focus group parents also reported a lack of confidence because of their own perception of the professional as more informed and deferring to the professional for decision-making on behalf of the child. Sometimes parents felt that the option for full participation in decision-making for their child was not available to them, because professionals left little room for parental input.

> That was horrible when you have to sit there, and they say, "So, what exactly do you want me to write?" Or, "There is no possible way. What else do you have?" Or, you don't even get to speak. Each person goes around, they read their goal. "This is what we are doing. Please sign here." Well, I don't see how I have participated in any of that.

In post-course discussion, however, parents reported a new sense of confidence in their contribution to parent–professional interactions. The change was due to a combination of increased knowledge about parents in special education and suggestions for increased involvement from other embedded parents. "I'll be more willing to go in and work more one-on-one with the professionals. Rather than saying, 'You're the professional; you know what to do.' Because I was always too shy or didn't know what to do." The shift in confidence did not necessarily mean that parents wished to assume sole responsibility for decisions related to their child's care, but desired more equal input and influence.

> Before this class—for most of us, I think—we expected professionals to be the professional.…I think now for me, I want the professional to be

prepared, but I, also, I don't mind showing the professional what the course should be.

This self-assurance came, in part, from the realization that professionals are learners as well as experts. "One of the things I remember is thinking that all professionals probably have more information.…I'd turn to them really looking for answers, and maybe they really didn't have them. It set me back in remembering that we're all students."

The course appeared to also increase parental confidence because it provided a forum for sharing with other parents who are new to having a child with a disability. As one parent shared before the course began, parents may feel engulfed by input when attempting to navigate disability information and services. "When you first start off, it's overwhelming. You're bombarded with everything, and you're kind of like, 'Okay. All right. I have no idea. This is all new, and I don't know what to do.'" Whereas, sharing the family story and related experiences enabled parents to find a new sense of purpose that extended beyond advocating for their own child.

> I think that it gave me some self-value, like self-worth. Like someone is going to learn from me. I spend so much of my time trying to help my kids. You forget what you're doing is learning, and you're capable then of turning around teaching others or sharing with others what you know or what you learned or what you've had to dig from deep because nothing is laid out for you. You've got to learn how to navigate, and the more you advocate, the more you learn.

One parent echoed the confidence gained by others in the course as she reflected on her interaction with preservice professionals: "I feel like it's even better now, because I know where they're [professionals] coming from more after this class. And I feel like I know how to talk to them a little bit more intelligently about things, too." This statement not only reflects that the parent feels more equipped to meet professionals as equals but that her perception of professionals, in general, had developed.

Theme 3: From Defensiveness to Trust

After 16 weeks of learning course content, discussing course concepts from both a professional and parental standpoint, and applying course principles to their own families, embedded parents felt that the perspectives of all participants had grown. Pre-course focus group participants often felt it necessary to be defensive in order to communicate with professionals, sometimes viewing interactions in terms of a battle.

…you have to fight the war with a smile. Let them know that you are there and that your nose is in their business. And they'd better do it right, or you will just be there to gently remind them that we have gotten off track a little bit.

When discussing potential outcomes of the course, parents hoped that students would gain a better sense of a parent's perspective to prevent further defensive encounters. One parent revealed that, when necessary to obtain appropriate services for or to protect their child, parents usually feel responsible to come to their child's defense.

I want them [preservice educators] to know everything…that's coming from our heart, and if they can't handle it, get out. We don't want you. We can become mama bears and papa bears, and we will chase you out. It's not fun, but I want them to know that this is some serious business.

The idea that professionals present as superior to parents resonated with several pre-course focus group participants as well. "Some of these people [professionals] think, 'I've taught for 30 years. I've seen it all. Done it all. I'm going to tell *you*.'" Although some parents reported perceptions of professionals as exerting a superior attitude, others conveyed that parents' high expectations for professionals' knowledge was not always met. When asked what professionals should bring to a partnership, a pre-course focus group member stated, "Experience and knowledge of teaching, because he obviously went to school for that. Hopefully, they know something." Upon post-course reflection, another parent described one course outcome by saying, "I did get out of this class that there are some pretty smart kids out there, and they're going to be out there teaching our kids, and they do care."

Another significant area in which parents experienced perception change is in professionals' ability to become emotionally invested in the child with a disability. Before the course began, one parent explained a disconnect among parents and professionals in relation to the emotional connection to the child. "When it's my own child, it's my child, so it's your own world. I'm obviously much more emotionally involved and have more at stake, emotionally, than that professional does. That's huge." However, after the course, embedded parents recognized that the pre-professionals with whom they interacted did develop an emotional bond with the child and family through the experience.

I always felt like they [teachers] didn't care; my child was just another child that would fall through the cracks. But with this class, I have a different opinion now. I do know that there are some good educators out there who are interested in the children with special needs.…I was never afraid. I always wanted to be involved. I always wanted to speak what I thought was best as a parent, but I did not feel that they wanted to listen.

After the course, parents reflected a much altered perception of emerging professionals, mainly due to direct encounters with the students through field experiences. "I think meeting wherever we met—outdoors, the Student Union, everywhere we met—it did not have the impact that it did when they came into my house." Another parent added,

> She [preservice teacher] made a remark to me, "I just don't know how you get anything done!" I'm like, "You learn to do dishes with a kid hanging off your leg." So, I think that that belief to make a difference, to change their mindset, was really neat.

Before the course, one parent reflected the sentiment that parents and professionals both tend to expect too much from one another, but professionals seem to ask, "Why isn't the parent doing…" rather than working with the parent to reduce barriers.

> …it was really, really good for me to see that change. After dealing with their [preservice teachers] attitude toward parents and what they thought of all parents [before the course] and what they had to go through even to make it to IEP meetings…

> …they [preservice teachers] learned not to judge, which is really important, because they know us individually as parents. I think that's been a big experience in this class, is that judgment factor…I feel *we* have made the biggest differences in their lives. I've seen it, and I've heard it from them.

> I was surprised that the students said, IEP meetings—they are brutal. And several of the students said, "We have got to figure out a way not to do that to you folks." The kids that did go to the IEP meetings said, "Whoa! It is different on the other side of the table," and I was pleased to see that.

Quotes reveal that the embedded parents felt reciprocal empathy with the preservice teachers that resulted from getting to know one another in a parent–professional context. One embedded parent recounted an experience with a student assigned to her family, "When we were going over the presentation, like practicing, they [students in my group] said, 'we' did…and it was like, stuff that I did for [child's name]. But she said, 'we' so I think that she really did put herself in my shoes, and I think they would do 110%."

> My students went to our IEP meeting, and I was surprised when we walked out, and they said, "That was intimidating!" I found it interesting that the students really saw what it felt like to be on the other side of the table.

In addition to feeling that the students better understood the parent perspective on the IEP process, parents also developed a clearer sense of the work required of a teacher in preparation for the IEP meeting. When asked to reflect upon the most significant personal change she experienced as a result of the course, one mother replied,

…I think it was looking through somebody else's eyes. I didn't realize how long it took to write an IEP. I didn't realize how much work, especially when things had changed for teachers, how difficult that transition was for them. I think it also opened my eyes that, sometimes, it's not necessarily the bad teacher. That it could be more of a systemic problem—that the person who is writing the IEP is doing the very best that they possibly can, but that their hands are also tied.…So, I think that, to me, was a huge eye-opening experience, because you are fighting that person in the IEP meeting, and that person may want the best for your child and their hands may be tied.

Further, parents felt able to approach professionals more openly after participation in the course, having an increased expectation for honest and productive communication. "It's [the class] made me more willing to reach for that wisdom, because of the group experience and coming to collaboration… making me more collaborative and less combative."

I had some really bad experiences, but this has made me be a little more trusting and to tell them that it's okay to say I don't know. At least be honest with me. And I think that's giving me a better voice.

The interactions mandated by course activities generated relationships among embedded parents and preservice educators that resulted in perception change because of the opportunity to know one another on a more personal level. "I think back when we told our stories and just the reaction of the students changed things right there. We [embedded parents] were all crying, but they [preservice teachers] were all crying, too."

Yeah, on the first focus group I remember saying that I didn't want the professionals to give up on my son, because I was going through that with different speech therapists. But I would never say that about these students. I know that they would never give up on my child.

I do think it helped me to have their perspective a little better. You know, I think that I went into it thinking more about what I could teach them about my perspective. And that is the goal, I think, but I do think that I learned a little bit more about where they're coming from, too.

Theme 4: From Despair to Hope

Perhaps the most significant outcome of course participation for parents was an overall sense of contributing to a brighter future for parent–professional collaboration and better outcomes for students with disabilities. Even before the course began, parents hoped for improved communication among parents and professionals that would affect their child's school experience. "I want to develop a better working relationship with special educators who are going to be in my son's life all throughout his school years. Learn ways to communicate better and know where they're coming from a bit more." Another parent echoed this desire to learn strategies for effective communication with professionals on a level that generally only comes with experience. "I'm hoping to learn to speak with teachers better. I haven't had experiences yet to learn from…I'm hoping to bite that on the head before it happens and learn things before I make a mistake." One parent reflected his wish to help by participating, stating, "The ability to not only change those people who will be hitting the streets when our kids are still in school, those of us who have young ones, may directly impact our children beyond just the world around us."

Reflecting the findings of Royea and Appl (2009), after the course, many parents felt that it was realistic for the communication skills and relationship-building gained in the course to transfer into everyday settings.

> The same kind of relationship with the professionals that I'm going to be dealing with, by what we did with the students, I really think if we can do that with the students and see that in the students, then why can't we do that with the professionals that we're dealing with in school now?

The hope for the course to serve as a catalyst for change mainly stemmed from parents' exasperating experiences in navigating supports and services for their child with a disability. Before the class began, parents shared,

> I don't want any other parents to have to go through the hell that we have been through…if there is anything we can do that the next family doesn't have to do, this is time well spent for me. The next kids coming down the pipe are my kids, too. It's like I've got ownership of all kids with special needs somehow. We are all in this together.

> I think there are a lot of things that we're all going to get out of the class, but I really think that the main reason, most of us, are probably doing this class is so that we can give back, and hopefully the new students coming up can help parents have better experiences than what we've had.

A pre-course focus group participant stated that her purpose for participating as an embedded parent was because "I want to give as much as I can to those students [preservice teachers], because they are the professionals, and

other parents might not have to go through the devastations that we have had to go through."

After spending the semester learning alongside preservice educators, parents developed reassurance that the course with embedded parents did, in fact, make a positive impact on the emerging professionals that would produce a long-term difference in the arena of parent–professional partnerships.

> I think, in the future, I feel more confident that there are going to be some very good people in our school system, because you've made the difference in their roles. So, I think I'm very excited about that. I wish I knew all people coming in had gone through the class.

One parent expressed confidence that the course's influence may directly impact his child. "There is a good chance that this could still impact our children, because these very same students could be in our school district in just a couple of years." This influence became increasingly meaningful to other parents in the post-course discussion, as several parents related that the impact of their participation was likely to reach much farther than their own families, because the university students in the course would be teaching around the nation and for many years to come. "I feel like I'm helping everyone's future. It might be my child's because we're not done yet, but especially kids that are young that maybe aren't even in the major programs yet."

> It's not just about our children, which is what I think I thought. It's not about my daughter. It's about all our kids…I had a part in that. Even if I never see it. So, I think that mentoring role that we kind of adopted would come out of this experience.

Parents expressed optimism in how the preservice teachers would serve the children with disabilities and also in the caliber of parent–professional collaboration that may result from the embedded parent course. "It seems like what they've learned…you really look forward to seeing how they're going to work. How they're actually going to be with parents and work with parents and come together. I think there's some hope in there." One embedded parent summed up the hope inspired by the course experience nicely, saying, "For students, the most valuable aspect is the ability to see and almost experience life outside the book or expected result of life. For me, the parent, the possibility of even better care for our children."

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that an embedded parent experience contributes to parent empowerment in all areas identified by researchers

as significant to attaining empowerment: (a) playing an active role in the education and decision-making process; (b) receiving access to resources; (c) effecting change in one's life and/or community; (d) feeling part of a group or sense of belonging; (e) having a sense of self-efficacy; (f) experiencing hope; (g) changing perceptions and learning to think critically; and (h) receiving respect (Carpenter & Phil, 1997; Dunst, 2002; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009; Murray et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Summers et al., 2005). Post-course focus group results clearly depict that parents felt better equipped to participate fully in the decision-making process, which is a critical element of empowerment (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Successful participation in course activities armed parents with new knowledge of rights and available supports and increased their self-efficacy in actively partnering with professionals. Relationships with professionals and other participants increased embedded parents' knowledge of and access to resources in the community as well as facilitated group membership among parents. Parents who were newer to raising a child with a disability benefitted especially from these factors, but veteran parents experienced a deeper sense of effecting change in the community by transmitting important advice to newer parents that helped to simplify new parents' navigation of complex disability services.

All parents experienced an adjustment of perceptions toward professionals, citing increased personal interaction and communication as reasons for change. Likewise, parents strongly believed that preservice teachers' perceptions of parents had been altered as a result of field experiences and personalization of the parent–professional partnership. The Virtual Family activity and the final presentation of student–family interactions proved to be excellent vehicles for students and parents to think critically about the trust, communication, and perspective-taking necessary for effective partnerships. Overall, the embedded parent experience helped participants have hope for the future and allowed parents to see themselves as change agents, impacting preservice educators to help them emerge as family-centered professionals.

The unique nature of this phenomenological study provides practitioners and parents with an image of how working collaboratively can build strong partnerships and empower parents to be agents of change. Furthermore, this study provides a model for reciprocal parent–professional partnership training. The present study also explores how efforts to empower parents can change negative perspectives held by parents and pre-professionals, supporting the formation of trusting partnerships.

Parents participated as embedded parents in this course with the intent of impacting the perceptions of preservice teachers, yet they reflected a profound personal change as a result of the course as well. Data obtained by comparing

parental attitudes in pre-course focus groups to those in post-course focus groups revealed a distinct path of change. Parents felt empowered when their lived experiences (opinions and knowledge about their child and schools) were valued by preprofessionals. Parents developed a willingness to view preservice teachers on a more personal level, and by doing so, increased opportunities for positive interactions. Parents felt more confident to advocate for services for their children due to participation as embedded parents. This study suggests that networking among families may also contribute to parental empowerment. Parents perceived an increase in decision-making power due to access to new information and resources. Furthermore, giving parents the opportunity to gain information, share experiences, and support one another generated a sense of group belonging that enhanced empowerment (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009; Kirby, Edwards, & Hughes, 2008). The final benefit clearly demonstrated through this research was the increased feeling of hope for the future that the course gave to participating parents.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are mainly related to lack of diversity in the sample. All participants reside in one region of a Midwestern state and nearly all (all except four) embedded parents were female and Caucasian. Most parent participants were also married, alluding to the fact that the time, travel, and child care requirements for course participation may be difficult for a single parent of a child with a disability. More than half of the participants had completed high school, also limiting the sample in regard to educational level.

Future Research

Future research may enrich the diversity of the sample by recruiting as participants more fathers, individuals from minority groups, and parents who are not married or partnered. Additional research is needed in the area of parent empowerment in order to truly support families' efforts to confidently make informed decisions about their child's educational experience. It would also be interesting to follow the parents who were embedded in this course to ascertain their leadership endeavors after their involvement in the course. It would be worthwhile to look at the responses of the fathers who were embedded in the course and analyze them individually to determine if their responses differed significantly from the mothers. This qualitative study could also be paired with quantitative survey results, looking at dispositions of parent–professional partnerships before and after the course or intervention. Finally, it would be noteworthy to investigate if teachers who took this course were more likely to empower their students' parents once they were practicing in the field.

Conclusions

It is evident that parents want to be respected, understood, and valued in the educational decision-making process for their child with a disability. Both parents and professionals could benefit from increased interactions and education on how to create successful partnerships. To date, no evidence has been found that other universities embed parents of children with special needs into undergraduate or graduate courses for a full semester. This study demonstrates the benefits to parents of children with disabilities from this innovative educational practice.

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Increasing the Effectiveness of Homework for All Learners in the Inclusive Classroom

Nicole Schrat Carr

Abstract

This article discusses how teachers can increase the effectiveness of homework assignments for all learners. Homework, when designed and implemented properly, is a valuable tool for reinforcing learning. This essay provides a summary of educational research on homework, discusses the elements of effective homework, and suggests practical classroom applications for teachers. The synthesis of these three areas is intended to supplement the literature on homework in order to help preprofessional and current teachers increase the effectiveness of homework and employ best practices in inclusive classroom settings. With the increasing number of students with special needs included in general education settings and the increasing pressure placed on students to make academic gains on standardized tests, it is more important than ever that teachers are equipped with the tools necessary to effectively use homework as a learning tool for all students regardless of their ability levels.

Key Words: homework, learning, inclusive classrooms, special education, students with disabilities, supports, teachers, inclusion, parents, studying, home

Introduction

Homework is often a contentious issue for students, parents, and teachers. When utilized properly, homework can be a valuable tool for reinforcing learning that takes place in the classroom. Unfortunately, many teachers do not

use homework effectively. Teachers can improve their utilization of homework by using research-tested strategies and accommodations (McNary, Glasgow, & Hicks, 2005). However, finding the time to read research, understand its implications, and then apply them can be a challenge for time-strapped teachers. The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of homework research, outline the elements of effective homework, and provide practical suggestions for classroom applications.

Increasing the effectiveness of homework is a multifaceted goal. Accommodations, organization, structure of assignments, technology, home–school communication, and students' home life all influence the effectiveness of homework. Teachers are often given the additional challenge of differentiating instruction for students with a wide range of abilities and varying exceptionalities. Studies have found that students with disabilities experience more difficulty with homework than their classmates without disabilities (McNary et al., 2005). Other students may require an additional challenge in order to receive the most benefit from homework. As inclusive classrooms are more often than not the norm in the U.S., teachers must recognize that students often need accommodations in the way homework is organized and structured in order for it to be most effective.

As student performance and achievement are increasingly placed under scrutiny, teachers are under more pressure than ever to produce results on standardized tests. Research indicates that, along with classroom instruction and students' responses to class lessons, homework is an important factor that increases student achievement (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Keith & Cool, 1992; Keith et al., 1993; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984). "Although results vary, meta-analytic studies of homework effects on student achievement report percentile gains for students between 8% and 31%" (Van Voorhis, 2011, p. 220). If teachers can learn to utilize research-based best practices to increase the effectiveness of homework, they will have a powerful tool for helping students make academic gains and perform to the best of their ability.

Summary of Research

Homework is often a hot-button issue for schools and is thus a frequent topic of educational research. Harris Cooper, a leading expert on the relationship between homework and achievement, defines homework as "tasks assigned by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during noninstructional time" (Bembenutty, 2011b, p. 185). There is considerable debate over the effectiveness of homework among researchers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In 2006, Cooper, Robinson, and Patall conducted a meta-analysis of

homework-related research and found that there is a positive relationship be-
tween the amount of homework students do and their academic achievement.
On the opposite side of the argument, researchers such as Kohn (2006), Bennet
and Kalish (2006), and Kralovec and Buell (2000) make a strong case against
homework arguing that it marginalizes economically disadvantaged students
who find it difficult to complete homework because of inequities in their home
environments. They also assert that teachers, in general, are not well trained in
how to create effective homework assignments. While these researchers point
out some valid cautions, the body of evidence suggesting that homework can
be beneficial should compel school policy and the improvement of teachers'
preparation for and utilization of the best homework practices. How then, can
educators utilize homework to be most effective? Teachers should be provided
with the tools and knowledge necessary to create effective homework. Rather
than ask whether or not homework improves learning, a better question is
"How can homework be improved to be doable and effective?" By answering
this question and creating effective homework assignments, the debate for and
against homework becomes a moot point (Voorhees, 2011). "When teachers
design homework to meet specific purposes and goals, more students complete
their homework and benefit from the results" (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001,
p. 191). In fact, when homework is properly utilized by teachers, it produces
an effect on learning three times as large as the effect of socioeconomic status
(Redding, 2000).

Educational research has repeatedly established the benefits of effective
homework. As previously indicated, Cooper and his colleagues (2006) found
"generally consistent evidence for a positive influence of homework on achieve-
ment" (p. 1), including end of course tests. In the same meta-analytic study, it
was found that the average student in a class assigned appropriate homework
scored 26 percentile points higher on tests than the average student in a class
not assigned homework. With only rare exceptions, the relationship between
the amount of homework students complete and their achievement was found
to be positive and statistically significant (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). It is
noteworthy that the correlation between homework and achievement appears
to be stronger in grades seven through twelve than in kindergarten through
sixth (Cooper et al., 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Protheroe, 2009).

Cooper (2007) suggests that teachers should consider the broad benefits of
homework. Three of the benefits he highlights are long-term academic bene-
fits, such as better study habits and skills; nonacademic benefits, such as greater
self-direction, greater self-discipline, better time management, and more inde-
pendent problem solving; and greater parental involvement and participation
in schooling (Cooper, 2007; Protheroe, 2009). The benefits and purposes of

homework also vary at different grade levels. Cooper (2007) noted that in the earliest grade levels, homework should promote positive attitudes, habits, and character traits; allow appropriate parent involvement; and reinforce learning of simple skills taught in class. In upper elementary grades, homework should play a more direct role in fostering improved achievement in school. Finally, in grades six onward, it should facilitate improving standardized test scores and grades (Cooper, 2007; Marzano & Pickering, 2007). When homework is effective, it benefits many aspects of students' learning experience.

One of the most important benefits of homework is the acquisition of self-regulation. Two studies by Xu (2008a, 2008b) linked homework management to homework completion. In a 2009 study, Xu found that student achievement appeared to be related to all five subscales of homework management (setting an appropriate work environment, managing time, handling distraction, monitoring motivation, and controlling negative emotion). "Specifically, compared with low-achieving students, high-achieving students reported more frequently working to manage their workspace, budget time, handle distraction, monitor motivation, and control emotion while doing homework" (Xu, 2009, p. 37). Bembenutty (2011c) found that a positive relationship exists between homework activities and self-efficacy, responsibility for learning, and delay of gratification. "Homework assignments can enhance the development of self-regulation processes and self-efficacy beliefs, as well as goal setting, time management, managing the environment, and maintaining attention" (Bembenutty, 2011c, p. 449). These are skills that will serve students well not only as they proceed through their schooling but also as working adults (Bembenutty, 2011a). Self-regulatory skills can be taught and develop over time with repeated practice. "Evidence from experimental studies shows that students can be trained to develop self-regulation skills during homework activities" (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011, p. 195). A study by Schmitz and Perels (2011) found that eighth grade students receiving daily self-regulation support during math homework performed better on post-tests than their peers who did not receive self-regulation support. Teaching these skills to students should be a priority for teachers and a focal point when designing homework assignments.

Research has also provided insight on how to make homework most effective for students with learning disabilities and the challenges they face. The importance of homework for students with learning disabilities has increased as these students spend more time in inclusive classrooms (Patton, 1994). Estimates for the prevalence of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) "range as high as 20% of the population, but recent reports to Congress on IDEA usually show that about 5% of school-age children and youths are receiving services under the SLD category" (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities,

2011, p. 239). Teachers are faced with the challenge of educating all types of students in inclusive settings, including students who have undiagnosed learning disabilities. "Research has shown that homework can have positive effects on school achievement for students with learning disabilities" (Patton, 1994, p. 570; see also Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993). There is also evidence that homework can have a compensatory effect for students with lower abilities (Keith, 1982), allowing them to earn grades much like their typically developing peers (Polachek, Kneieser, & Harwood, 1978). In a study by Rosenberg (1989) investigating the effects of homework assignments on the acquisition and fluency of basic skills of students with learning disabilities, he found that homework was most effective if the students accurately completed their assignments and demonstrated at least moderate acquisition of the instructional material. Truesdell and Abramson (1992) found a positive correlation between homework completion and academic performance for mainstreamed students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. Although there is a need for more research in this area, there is evidence in the current literature that homework can have positive benefits for students with learning disabilities. In fact, "research examining the effect of homework on academic achievement of students with learning disabilities has generally been positive" (Gajria & Salend, 1995, p. 291).

While homework is a valuable tool in inclusive classrooms, it is important that teachers understand the challenges students with varying exceptionalities will face. Students with learning disabilities are more likely to have problems with homework that their nondisabled peers (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001; Bryan & Nelson, 1995; Bryan, Nelson, & Mathur, 1995; Epstein et al., 1993). Characteristics of students with learning disabilities interfere with every step of homework, "including understanding assignments, accurately recording them, remembering to take materials home, setting time aside to work, organizing necessary materials, following through and completing work, putting it in a safe place, and then remembering to take it back to school" (Bryan et al., 2001, p. 168). Students with learning disabilities also often have negative attitudes towards homework (Bryan & Nelson, 1995; Bryan et al., 1995; Sawyer, Nelson, Jayanthi, Bursuck, & Epstein, 1996). When teachers design more effective homework that meets the characteristics described in the next section, it helps to alleviate many of these issues for students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the issues and resulting practices for learning disabled students are relevant and helpful for all students in the inclusive classroom, regardless of whether or not they have a disability.

Research has demonstrated that homework can be an effective teaching tool for all types of students. The accomplished teacher should make a concerted

effort to increase the effectiveness of homework through research-based practices. When research is applied to the classroom in meaningful ways, it is a powerful tool for developing successful teaching strategies. Navigating through the challenges of inclusive settings is difficult, but educational research has repeatedly suggested that homework can be an important tool for helping learners at all levels of ability achieve at a higher level.

What Makes Homework Effective?

In order to increase homework effectiveness, teachers must understand what makes homework effective. Cathy Vatterott (2010) identified five fundamental characteristics of good homework: purpose, efficiency, ownership, competence, and aesthetic appeal. Purpose means that all homework assignments are meaningful. Teachers should give students assignments that are purposeful for them and methods that work for their learning styles. Teachers should not assign homework as a matter of routine, rather, only when there is a specific purpose. Students must also understand the purpose of the assignment and why it is important in the context of their academic experience (Xu, 2011). Assigning "busy work" or rote assignments is counterproductive. Homework should provide teachers with feedback about student understanding (Redding, 2000) and thus should reinforce concepts. Homework should not be given on topics that have not been taught (Redding, 2000). Finally, students should leave the classroom with a clear sense of what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it (Protheroe, 2009).

Efficiency is the second hallmark of effective homework. Homework should not take an inordinate amount of time and should require thinking. Students who spend too much time on homework (more than 90 minutes at the middle school level) actually perform worse than students who spend less time (Cooper et al., 2006; Shumow, 2011). Some schools use the policy of 10 minutes a night of homework in first grade and then add ten minutes for each subsequent grade level (Redding, 2000). This provides a common expectation for homework that gradually increases as students grow and develop. Tasks that are of moderate difficulty are most likely to enhance student motivation (Dettmers, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Kunter, & Baumert, 2010). Assignments that are too easy can lead to boredom, and assignments that are too difficult lead to frustration. Well structured assignments that are adequately difficult are key.

The third hallmark of effective homework is ownership. Students who feel connected to the content and assignment learn more and are more motivated. Providing students with choice in their assignments is one way to create ownership. Connecting assignments with student interest is also essential for

promoting ownership (Warton, 2001; Xu 2011). Getting to know students and even visiting them at home not only helps educators better create effective assignments based on student interests, but it also facilitates student ownership because they know their teacher cares (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005). As Warton (2001) has noted it is also incredibly important that students understand the utility of homework and view it as important. In addition, homework should be structured in a way that the students can accomplish it with relatively high success rates (Protheroe, 2009). When students can take pride in a job well done, they feel more ownership of their work.

Competence is the fourth hallmark of effective homework. Students should feel competent in completing homework. In order to achieve this, it is beneficial to abandon the one-size-fits-all model. "Homework that students can't do without help is not good homework; students are discouraged when they are unable to complete homework on their own" (Vatterott, 2010, p. 13). Homework should be differentiated so that it is the appropriate level of difficulty for individual students. This can be achieved in a variety of ways: different rubrics, shorter assignments (Cooper & Nye, 1994), or more challenging requirements for gifted students. Teachers also need to take into account accommodations recommended for students with special needs as noted on their IEPs. The sheer amount of work can be a huge obstacle for struggling students. In addition, it is of great importance that educators adequately explain and scaffold assignments to ensure success.

Aesthetic appeal is the fifth hallmark of effective homework and is often overlooked by teachers. The way homework looks is important. "Wise teachers have learned that students at all levels are more motivated to complete assignments that are visually uncluttered. Less information on the page, plenty of room to write answers, and the use of graphics or clip art make tasks look inviting and interesting" (Vatterott, 2010, p. 15). Ultimately, effective homework should be purposeful, efficient, personalized, doable, and inviting.

Classroom Application

Understanding research on homework and what makes it effective is useless unless a teacher can translate this information into practice in the classroom. The practical applications for increasing homework effectiveness can be divided into three categories: strategies for teachers, parent involvement and training, and self-regulation strategies. There are a variety of research-based strategies for helping teachers increase the effectiveness of homework in inclusive settings. These strategies are not only helpful for students with special needs but for all students in the classroom. As previously stated, it is important that home-

work has a clear purpose and is not assigned simply as a matter of routine. This purpose should be explicitly expressed to students; they should have a clear understanding of instructions as well. Homework should not be used to teach new material (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Patton, 1994), and students should fully understand the concepts and possess the skills needed to complete homework assignments. Homework should never be assigned as a form of punishment (Patton, 1994; Redding, 2006) and should be structured so that it is challenging without being overwhelming (Protheroe, 2009).

In the classroom there are several procedures teachers can utilize to improve homework effectiveness. Teachers should assign homework at the beginning of class. Homework should be explained and directions should be posted on the board in writing (McNary et al., 2005). Students should be given the opportunity to start homework in class (Cooper & Nye, 1994; McNary et al., 2005; Patton, 1994) so that the teacher can check for understanding and provide students with assistance before they leave. Homework should be explicitly related to the class work. Finally, homework should be returned promptly with feedback (Redding, 2006). Students learn more from homework that is graded, commented upon, and discussed in class by teachers (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Jenson, Sheridan, Olympia, & Andrews, 1994; Keith, 1987; Protheroe, 2009; Redding, 2000, 2006).

Students with learning disabilities may exhibit one or more of several characteristics that make homework completion challenging, including distractibility, procrastination, need for constant reminders to start working, failure to complete homework, daydreaming, and problems working independently (Patton, 1994). In addition to the suggestions in the preceding paragraph, there are some additional strategies teachers can employ to help these students have more success with homework. Teachers should assess students' homework skills so that they are aware of potential problems. They should also involve parents from the beginning (Patton, 1994), as parental involvement in homework has been found to lead to higher homework completion, which in turn produces higher achievement (Keith, 1992). It is very important that the consequences of not completing homework are clearly communicated to students and parents (Patton, 1994). Teachers should differentiate homework where necessary by providing different rubrics, shorter assignments, or more appropriate passages based on reading level. Time frames can also be adjusted for students with learning disabilities (McNary et al., 2005). Finally, teachers should coordinate with one another so that students are not being overwhelmed with many assignments and projects at the same time (McNary et al., 2005; Patton, 1994).

Parents are an essential element of successful homework practice; many studies and reviews of the literature have found that increased parent involvement

is associated with improved student achievement (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Teachers cannot follow students home, so it is important that parents are provided with the tools to successfully be involved with their children's homework. A highly effective way to do so is for teachers to provide training at the beginning of the school year on how to best assist their children with their homework (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Redding, 2000; Shumow, 1998). It may also be helpful for parents to see examples of how teachers or skilled parents work with children on homework assignments (Shumow, 2003). Parents should be encouraged to serve in a supporting role (Redding, 2006). One way to accomplish this is to provide

> some guidance on the purpose of the assignment and how teachers would like parents to help. If parents perceive that the teachers are more interested in learning goals and in promoting higher order thinking and that elaboration and transfer of responsibility to the child are ways to accomplish those goals, then parents might be more likely to help in less controlling and more elaborative ways. (Shumow, 2003, p. 21)

Well designed homework should not require parents to teach their children acquisition-stage skills and thus will also help parents serve in a supporting role. Several meta-analytic studies have found that high parental expectations also make a significant impact on student achievement (Jeynes, 2011). Parents should create a homework environment that is conducive to learning (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Patton, 1994). There should be a specific time and area for homework completion. The area should be distraction free and have the necessary materials for completing homework (Redding, 2000, 2006). Parents should also encourage their children and maintain involvement (Patton, 1994). Teachers can assist parents by conveying these suggestions at back to school nights, in classroom newsletters, and at parent–teacher conferences.

Parent communication is also an important consideration for effective homework practices. Parents can be powerful allies for teachers, but teachers need to keep them informed (Shumow, 2011; Redding, 2000). Technology has made parent communication easier than ever for teachers. Email, phone-based homework hotlines, and online homework sites can be used to supplement traditional assignment books. Educators can survey parents to know the most convenient form of communication for each family. Keeping parents informed of assignments and when their child needs extra help is essential for effective homework practice. Additionally, teachers can provide parents with a list of suggestions on how to best help their children with homework. Report cards,

student-led conferences, and school newsletters are also valuable forms of communication (Redding, 2000). Communication is most effective when it flows in both directions, and teachers should aim to listen to and communicate with parents rather than simply informing them (Redding, 2000). When teachers include parents, a powerful alliance is formed to help children be successful and for homework to be more effective (McNary et al., 2005).

While teachers and parents can work together to positively contribute to the success of students, educators must also remember that the home environments of students are often unequal. While some students have educated parents and technology at their disposal, others live in relatively unsupervised homes—often due to parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet—without technology or other resources. Teachers need to be aware of these inequities and barriers when designing homework assignments to ensure that all students can complete the assignments successfully. In a recent study, Bennett-Conroy (2012) found that, for many parents, these barriers may be overcome when teachers design "interactive assignments which do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge and by teacher initiated phone calls that take place when a parent has time" (Bennett-Conroy, 2012, p. 104). Older siblings and other relatives can also be a valuable resource for families, and many schools in underserved communities also provide afterschool programs with supervised homework help.

The final area that teachers can apply research-based practices to improve homework effectiveness is self-regulation. In order to successfully complete homework, students must learn to self-regulate (Xu, 2009; Xu & Corno, 1998) by setting goals, selecting appropriate learning strategies, maintaining motivation, monitoring progress, and evaluating homework outcomes (Bembenutty, 2011c). Students must be taught these skills, and teachers can assist students to learn self-regulating skills in a variety of ways. Teachers should reinforce the use of planners and other time management tools in the classroom. These tools should be part of classroom routines and modeled by the teacher. It is also important for teachers to remind students of due dates on a regular basis both orally and by writing them on the board. Teachers can teach students to delay gratification in class and encourage them to apply the same techniques at home. Finally, students must be taught how to evaluate and self-reflect. Teachers should actively scaffold and teach these metacognitive skills as part of their curriculum. By integrating self-regulation skills into the curriculum, teachers add a level of effectiveness to homework that will serve all their students throughout the rest of their lives.

Conclusion

Homework has the potential to be an extremely valuable part of students' learning experience. The increasing frequency of inclusive classroom settings, however, makes designing and implementing effective homework a challenge for teachers. Fortunately, research has provided teachers with valuable tools and knowledge to meet this challenge successfully. It is the teacher's responsibility to create effective homework assignments and to provide students and parents with the tools necessary for the process to be as successful as possible. If teachers make a concerted effort to utilize classroom strategies to assist students, design homework in a manner research suggests is most effective, provide opportunities for positive parent involvement, and actively teach self-regulation, they will create a homework program that sets all students up for success. Creating assignments that meet the five hallmarks of effective homework (purpose, efficiency, ownership, competence, and aesthetic appeal) will facilitate student interest in homework and promote the belief among students and parents that homework is meaningful and important (Vatterot, 2010). Educators can set students up for success by communicating with parents about homework expectations and student needs, taking into account varying exceptionalities in homework design, and teaching students self-regulation techniques through homework assignments. By taking a community approach, educators can create an atmosphere in their schools where teachers, parents, and students work together as partners in the educational journey of students. When teachers believe in the importance of their homework enough to apply research-based strategies and truly facilitate effective homework practice, they will create a classroom of learners who also believe in the importance of the work and, ultimately, of themselves.

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Maximizing College Readiness for All Through Parental Support

Jack Leonard

Abstract

The lack of college readiness skills is a national problem, particularly for underachieving high school students. One solution is to offer authentic early college coursework to build confidence and academic momentum. This case study explored a partnership between a traditional, suburban high school (600 students) and a community college to maximize college credit accumulation for students from the middle academic quartiles and asked, "How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students?" The author analyzed data from planning meeting notes, student surveys, and interviews with leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Over three years, 74 students averaged 9.4 college credits/year with a 91% success rate. Parent engagement was indispensable for recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional guidance; the financial contribution actually seemed to stimulate parental involvement.

Key Words: case study, college credits, readiness, high school, dual enrollment, Massachusetts, parent participation, parent–school relationships, partnerships in education, program evaluation, school support, underachievement

Introduction and Problem Statement

In recent years, there has been growing concern that high school graduates are not ready for college, despite 25 years of standards-based reform (Conley,

2005; Kirst, 2008). This is particularly true for students who are not in the top academic quartile in their high school. Increasingly, these students are headed for college, but too many fail the college placement exams and waste valuable time and money while taking non-credit-bearing remedial courses.

Currently, nearly 20% of students entering four-year colleges and over 50% of those entering two-year colleges require at least one remedial course (Complete College America, 2012). Rather than increasing graduation prospects, remediation is often the first step to dropping out. For students who start in remediation, only about one third earn a bachelor's degree in six years and less than 10% graduate from community colleges within three years (Complete College America, 2012). In Massachusetts, where this study was situated, the department of education tracked 2005 public high school graduates and found that 65% of those who enrolled in community colleges required at least one remedial course, versus 22% at state colleges and 8% at state universities (Plummer & Nellhaus, 2008).

College is expensive, and any approach that will reduce the cost of college is welcomed by parents and students. Dropping out of college is even more expensive, leaving many students with loan obligations, fewer job prospects, and a lifetime of lower earnings. Dropping out is also expensive for our country. Researchers estimate that college students who matriculated in 2002 but never graduated cost the nation $3.8 billion in lost income and $730 million in lost federal and state taxes for just one year (Schneider & Yin, 2011).

This paper reviews various approaches to improving college readiness for all students and asks the question: How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students? The author presents a case study of a partnership between a Massachusetts high school and a nearby state community college.

Agassiz High School (AHS, a pseudonym) is the sole high school in a small suburban Massachusetts town. In 2012, 7% of the 644 students in Grades 9–12 were non-white, 21% came from low-income families, 14% had individual education plans, and less than 2% were limited English proficient (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2012b). On state assessments, AHS placed near the middle of suburban high schools and boasted an 85% graduation rate. In June 2010, there were 149 graduates; 62% signaled intentions to attend a four-year college, 32% declared plans for a two-year college or trade school, and 6% were headed for work or the military (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2012a). Within 16 months, however, only 121 students (81% of the graduates) were attending a two- or four-year postsecondary institution.

Agassiz is not a college town. In 2009, 37.2% of the adult population (25 years or older) had a bachelor's degree, close to the state average of 37.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). School surveys indicated that parents of the first early college cohort averaged 2.43 years of post-secondary education; several of the students were first-generation college students. This is not a wealthy town, where the estimated median household income in 2009 dollars was $63,545, compared to a statewide figure of $64,425 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The high school offered six Advanced Placement courses and several dual enrollment courses in a partnership with New England Community College (NECC, fictitious name), a nearby two-year institution in the Common-wealth's network of two- and four-year public colleges. AHS was a top feeder school for NECC, sending 25 to 45 graduates on to study there each year.

Review of the Literature

This review will define college readiness, review the strengths and weaknesses of various college readiness interventions, and then examine psychological and environmental factors which affect readiness and challenge our definition. David Conley, a national expert on college readiness, offered this definition:

> College readiness can be defined operationally as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program. "Succeed" is defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence or the next level of course in the subject area. (Conley, 2007, p. 5)

Conley offered four categories of college readiness skills: content knowledge, cognitive strategies such as analysis and problem-solving, academic behaviors such as time management, and contextual skills and knowledge, which would familiarize the student with a campus environment (Conley, 2008).

Educators employ a variety of strategies to increase college readiness, which are listed here from least to most expensive. One general approach, which addresses content knowledge and cognitive strategies, is to improve the alignment of middle/high school and college curricula. A second approach is to build in extra programs, such as college success courses that teach academic behaviors, along with college fairs, college tours, guest speakers, or summer experiences on college campuses that help students gain contextual skills and knowledge. The advantage of both approaches is that they are inexpensive and everyone

can participate. However, many schools now use these approaches with marginal effectiveness.

The third general approach (and the focus on this paper) is to melt the boundary between the high school and college so students participate in authentic early college coursework while still in high school. High school students with a "front-load" of 12 to 20 college credits gain academic momentum and are more likely to enter college right after graduation, enroll on a full-time basis, and complete in four years (Adelman, 2006; Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). Indeed, one recent study reinforced this third approach, finding that effective college readiness interventions push high school students to enroll right after graduation, on a full-time basis, while addressing financial aid challenges, particularly with students headed to two-year colleges (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011). Jobs for the Future, which spearheaded the national Early College High School Initiative, described four kinds of early college coursework:

1. Examination-based college credit, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses and International Baccalaureate programs.
2. School-based credit programs, such as "concurrent enrollment," where college courses are taught at the high school by high school faculty under the supervision of college professors.
3. College-based credit programs, such as dual enrollment (DE), where students take college courses taught by college faculty (often at the high school).
4. Virtual online college-credit courses. (Hoffman, 2003, p. 6)

All four alternatives were utilized in the Agassiz partnership; these options were a key to maximizing college credit accumulation for many students.

In many high schools, the early college options are only accessed by students in the top academic quartile for whom college success is not really a question (Abell, 2007). This ignores the needs of the "forgotten middle" students (Delisio, 2009; Swanson, 2005) who come from the middle academic quartiles and often manifest these traits:

- Consistent school attendance
- Seldom get in trouble
- Never sign up for Honors classes
- Earn C-grades in classes that lack rigor
- Sit in the back of the classroom
- Rarely raise a hand or do anything to draw attention
- Have overworked parents with little time to advocate for children
- May move on to a community college and quit after a few courses
- May be first in the family to attend college (Delisio, 2009; Swanson, 2005)

As Swanson says, "Their parents and teachers are content that they are making it through and no alarm bells are going off. They constitute a large part of the middle two quartiles of students. They'll graduate, but won't be prepared for college" (2005, p. 31). Such students are unlikely to volunteer for rigorous early college coursework. How does one get these students, who don't even take Honors courses, to enroll in college coursework and complete 12 to 20 credits while still in high school? The early college high school movement is addressing these students, but the programs are small in size and number and financial support is uncertain (Hoffman, 2009; Webb, 2004).

The lack of attention to student choice is a shortcoming of the Conley schema. Conscientiousness, for example, "as measured by such traits as dependability, perseverance through tasks, and work ethic" is a top predictor of college success (Sparks, 2010, para. 7). Students who are not conscientious are unlikely to succeed on their own in rigorous coursework and thereby gain self-confidence to enter college. Adelman wrote, "One begins to see why student choice (and the responsibility inherent in student choice) emerges…as the principal challenge to academic advising and counseling from secondary through postsecondary education" (2006, p. 80). This highlights the importance of strong support mechanisms from guidance counselors, parents, and peers. This is particularly important for the underachieving "middle" students.

A second problem with early college options is that they are expensive. State support across the country is spotty and foundation funding is unsustainable (Webb, 2004). Many programs share the cost between the university, school district, and parents. In fact, parental contribution is widespread. For example, "nearly two-thirds of all higher education institutions offering dual enrollment reported that students or their parents paid at least a portion of tuition, and 20 percent reported that families assumed the full cost of tuition" (Abell, 2007, p. 19). College readiness is a partnership among many stakeholders.

In fact, some scholars argue that Conley's schema does not sufficiently address complex environmental factors that can reduce college completion rates, such as tuition costs, lack of supportive social networks, and the unfamiliarity faced by first-generation college students (Hernandez, 2011). Academic preparation is only one piece of the complex puzzle:

> Multiple research studies have shown the following to be the strongest predictors of college attendance and completion, particularly for minority and low-income students: academic preparation, social support, access to information, parental involvement, and knowledge about college and financial aid. (Martinez & Klopot, 2005, p. 5)

Therefore, effective college readiness interventions should address more than just the high school student, but include the family, counselors, and other relevant social networks.

Rationale

This review suggests that parents are a critical component in the development of college readiness, particularly for students in the middle academic quartiles. Parents provide social support around student choice when children are wavering before the daunting task of getting ready for college. Parents can promote conscientiousness and help in the development of dependability, perseverance, and a work ethic. Parents can join with students in learning about financial aid and paying the price of early college coursework. Parents can push their children to enroll in college and take a full load right after high school graduation. Parents play an indispensable role; many want their children to go to college, want them to succeed, and want to save money at the same time. Most college readiness research reports focus on the student and the schools, but not parents. There are two exceptions. Large school districts often include parents as one partner in an early warning system designed to flag at-risk students (see, for example, Fairchild et al., 2011). These programs catch students in danger of dropping out of the pipeline, but they do not promote specific college readiness skills. The other line of literature discusses the early college high school movement, but ignores the large number of traditional American high schools. This paper considers the role of parents in recruitment, enrollment, and support of academically average students in an early college program in a traditional high school.

Methodology

In 2007, a high school and local community college decided to expand their partnership to seriously address college readiness for all students. A planning team consisting of two high-level college administrators, the district superintendent and director of curriculum, the high school principal, and one guidance counselor met semimonthly for over two years. The author of this article joined the team as a participant–observer and engaged scholar. This inside view offered a level of data detail that would not be available to an outsider. The college readiness planning team began their work with these goals:

- More AHS students will earn college credit before high school graduation.
- More AHS students will take AP courses in their junior and senior years.

- More AHS students will attend college after high school graduation.
- Fewer AHS students will need remedial coursework at college.
- More AHS students will complete a college certificate or degree within four years of graduating from high school.

Arguing that the top quartile students were already in line to meet the college readiness goals, the planning team decided to target the two middle academic quartiles and to begin when the students were in tenth grade. They knew these students would need extra supports. This new, three-year college readiness program used a learning community model where a cohort of students took the same courses together each day. Students took a concurrent enrollment American Literature class, taught by a regular AHS teacher, that was aligned with the equivalent NECC English course. They also took two dual enrollment courses: a U.S. History course and a College Success Seminar taught by regular NECC professors (who taught the same courses on the college campus at night). The three course curricula were integrated, providing a seamless 84-minute learning experience for students each day at the high school. The integrated learning community is a common freshmen year college strategy to promote student retention (Sperling, 2009).

The faculty members met weekly to coordinate the work, balance the assignments, and discuss the progress of the students. Because both bargaining units were always present in the classroom, there were no union grievances. The College Success Seminar, which emphasized planning, time management, how to be a self-directed learner, and college-level reading and writing skills, proved to be a critical component. With 84 minutes every day, the cumulative hours for each course were actually twice the normal college allotment. In this way, students had far more time and support to complete reading and writing assignments, while the content rigor of the courses was equal to or even greater than the college campus versions. The course integration, College Success Seminar, extended time, and extra tutoring proved to be essential to helping academically average tenth grade students succeed.

The costs of the Early College program were shared by the college, high school, and parents, with parents paying only $600/year (Leonard, 2013). In 2013, regular tuition and fees for state residents at NECC were $157/credit in addition to registration fees; Early College families would have paid $1400 to $1800 for similar course loads at the college, so there were considerable savings. Families with financial need received assistance through a local community education foundation, which agreed to support the program. The sophomore year was the most expensive year because of the two college faculty members and extra classroom supports. As the planning team looked ahead to the junior and senior year experiences, they found various ways to contain costs

while increasing the college experience. Junior year students again took a year-long integrated course of American Literature II and U.S. History II, again with one AHS instructor and one NECC instructor, but this time without the college success course. Students also took a college dual enrollment class at the high school each semester (Studio Art and Environmental Science), so they earned 12 credits by the end of the year. Total scheduled hours were less than the sophomore year, but still more than regular college, and the total cost was still $600/student/year. NECC also sold other dual enrollment courses during the regular school year and in the summer for ambitious students who wanted to earn more credits. In the senior year, the integrated learning community was dissolved. Students took the standard freshmen college English Composition course in the fall (three credits), taught by an NECC instructor at the high school for $600. (This course was actually more expensive than the campus version, but parents saved substantially on the three-year cost of 24 or more credits.) Then, families could choose to purchase dual enrollment courses, virtual online courses, or even regular classes on the NECC campus during the second semester of the senior year. In this way, the gradual transition to an authentic college experience was complete.

This article previously described three general approaches to college readiness, which included curriculum alignment and extracurricular orientation experiences. The high school used elements of each approach. Curriculum alignment was addressed in several ways. Each concurrent enrollment course required articulation between the high school and equivalent college courses. In addition, the integrated learning community provided an opportunity for high school instructors to teach side-by-side with college faculty, thus comparing and matching expectations and rigor. The planning team also increased the number of extracurricular orientation experiences for high school students. The tenth grade College Success Seminar was an important addition, and there were also annual college fairs and tours (of both NECC and other campuses). Students in the Early College program were fully enrolled as NECC students, receiving student identification cards and access to the campus library, tutoring services, and online learning platform (Blackboard), thus addressing contextual skills and knowledge. Students also received a regular, indistinguishable college transcript.

Originally, the high school had one college readiness track which included Honors courses followed by AP and dual enrollment courses and was utilized by top quartile students. The new Early College program was targeted toward academically average students who did not take Honors courses, effectively opening a second pathway toward college and expanding overall college readiness in the student body.

Over three years, 74 Agassiz sophomores enrolled in three college courses as part of their regular school day. These students were recruited as freshmen from the two middle academic quartiles as measured by their grade point average (GPA). Their freshmen transcripts revealed B–C grade averages in primarily non-Honors courses. Comparison with a nonexperimental control group of students from the same two quartiles revealed no statistical difference in gender, race, socioeconomic status, or student achievement as measured by GPA and state assessments ($p < .05$). All 74 students passed the college courses and earned nine credits; many continued with the Early College program in their junior and senior years, accumulating as many as 35 college credits before graduation. After three years of program operation, Early College students successfully earned 1196 college credits (see Table 1), averaging 9.4 college credits/year with an overall 91% success rate (Leonard, 2012).

Table 1. Characteristics, Entering Early College Students & Credit Accumulation by June 2012

	Class of 2012	Class of 2013	Class of 2014
Original Number Grade 10	31	22	21
Average age	15 years, 8 mo.	15 years, 3 mo.	15 years, 7 mo.
Race	87% Caucasian	95% Caucasian	90% Caucasian
Gender	61% boys	59% boys	57% boys
Low income	16%	18%	24%
GPA*	2.80	2.88	2.94
Students with disabilities	0	5%	19%
ELLs	0	0	10%
Credits accumulated per student by June 2012	21.74	15.54	8.57

*GPA was based on a 4.3 scale for non-Honors courses, where 2.6 was equivalent to a C+ and 2.9 to a B-.

This study used an explanatory case study methodology to answer the question, "How can parental support help increase college readiness skills for academically average students?" Given the lackluster report cards of these freshmen students, school leaders wanted to better understand how they were inspired to complete a year of college while still in high school. Case study is an appropriate research methodology when investigating programs that are considered novel, unique, or innovative. The limited generalizability is balanced by the opportunity to explore fresh approaches to tough educational problems (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002).

The research methodology was crafted jointly by the planning team. Data instruments and collection methods included:

1. Student surveys used with all 74 students
2. Semistructured interviews used with small focus groups of students ($n = 48$; students were selected to represent the full range of academic outcomes)
3. Semistructured interviews used with parent focus groups; parents volunteered to be interviewed ($n = 25$)
4. Semistructured interviews with all early college teachers ($n = 7$), three guidance counselors, the school principal, district director of curriculum, and the college dean who attended the planning team meetings
5. Minutes of the semimonthly planning team meetings
6. Document artifacts, including financial reports and the AHS–NECC memorandum of agreement

Meetings and interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and reviewed with participants for accuracy. Survey data were statistically analyzed for mean responses and variability using Excel spreadsheets. Using an explanation building mode of analysis (Yin, 2002), qualitative data were analyzed through the method of constant comparison using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (*Weft*). All case studies present validity concerns; in our case, the multiple data sources provided rich triangulation. In addition, the planning team reviewed the results to verify the accuracy of details.

Results

Parent Engagement

Parents were an important partner in the Early College program. In the eyes of some, they were not particularly engaged with the program. For example, the Grade 10 and 11 instructors told me that no more than 20% of the parents were "actively engaged in their child's education," which implied that most of the parents did not attend parent–teacher nights and did not communicate with the school by telephone, email, or in person. On the other hand, there was ample evidence that the Early College program was working because of quiet, behind-the-scenes parental attention. Parents played an indispensable role in three main areas, which will be presented subsequently: recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional guidance.

Recruitment and Enrollment

Parents had different reasons for enrolling their child. The following conversation illustrates how parents aimed for an appropriate challenge for their

child and perceived the relative difficulty of the Early College program. Their daughter had taken a few Honors classes in freshmen year.

> The Honors classes were causing a little stress in the house. One of the classes, she had to be tutored, she had difficulty, and the college prep classes, I don't think, were quite hard enough, so we thought that Early College would be an excellent in-between. Plus it would give her some skills and credits for college—how could you go wrong? And maybe teach her some skills that she'll be able to carry forward.

(Other evidence from students and teachers indicated that the work load in the Early College classes was actually *greater* than Honors courses, but the multiple student support strategies made success more attainable.) Another parent was attracted to the College Success Seminar: "What pushed me to enroll her—not that she was very easy going at all—was the Success Seminar. Because what we see with our daughter is she lacks focus."

The researcher also asked the students, "Who were the people who influenced you to join the Early College Program?" Most students pointed to a parent (85%) and/or a guidance counselor (80%), which underscored the importance of both roles when it came to enlisting young students who were not academically proficient for this challenging program.

Almost all students agreed that their parents encouraged them to enroll. However, they had mixed reactions when asked if their parents *made* them enroll; in fact, there was more variation in responses to this statement than anywhere else on the surveys. The interviews confirmed the strong parental role. For example, one parent admitted,

> I was the one who brought it to her attention, whether or not she had actually heard of it through [school], but I broached the subject with her. She was open to it. It wasn't like she was jumping up and down. There was a little apprehension. "Early College success will help you in the long run. You might as well try it. It can only help; it won't hurt."

Another parent stated, "Ours was a joint decision," and this interview revealed the collaborative decision-making process:

> I guess we wanted to make sure she wanted to do it first. At first she was a little skeptical. We wanted to challenge her a little bit. She came home with the information and said, "Should I do this?" and then we came to the [spring] Open House and heard all about it and brought her with us and she said, "I think I can do this."

Other students also commented on the joint decision-making process:

> Ultimately I had the final decision on whether I wanted to or not. I think it was a good choice taking this.

My mom really wanted me to, but I wanted to more than she wanted me to. Just because I really like the idea of college credits.

It was really half and half. I'm always up for trying something new. At the time, I heard about the program, and I thought, you know, it might be a really good experience. Because it's a year in a cohort, not just a quarter or a semester, so there's obviously going to be a lot more getting done.

Um, my mom definitely, she found out about it first, and she told me a lot about it and that she was interested in it, and she definitely wanted to. I guess the idea that colleges saw it as you took a college course—that really attracted me, because I thought they'll love that. So that's what attracted me the most, but she was definitely pushing on it. She wanted me to, but in the end it was my decision, like I did agree with her.

In the middle of the year, however, when the work was difficult and students were struggling, they were more likely to "remember" who pushed them to enroll. A junior-year teacher commented:

A lot of them don't seem to be motivated by grades. It seems like the drafting of this may have been done, in part, by parental pressure, because the kids are saying, "I'm doing this because my mom made me do it!"

As these cases illustrate, parents played a significant role in helping 15-year-olds make a sensible decision with long-ranging effects. Earning college credits and saving on future tuition bills were not the only motivators for enrollment but certainly were a background factor. Parents seemed more likely to be asking, "What's the best step to help my child succeed this year?"

Financial Support

The obvious way in which parents played an indispensable role was in paying the $600 annual tuition fee. Without their contribution, the program would not have been sustainable. Most parents shouldered the entire fee, although a few seniors indicated they paid as much as two-thirds of the cost themselves. Despite the cost, most parents viewed the expense as a real bargain on the cost of college, as this father said:

I'm thinking about real tuition in the future. This is a really good deal. Joe's taken some summer classes, and I know what they cost. I know future tuition costs will be much, much more. This is money in the bank for me.

This was not a wealthy suburb, and the cost was a real burden for many, as this father confessed:

Dan and his mother, who has medical issues like me, so that puts a big strain on me. So, for me, it was really, really hard, and the school helped out. Otherwise, Dan wouldn't be doing this. He works part-time (two days a week), which is a lot in light of all his other activities.

These students were not academic all stars. In their junior year, a few students failed the college courses, which was a serious financial blow. One student admitted, "My mom wanted me to switch out this year. It's like $600, and I'm failing it!" Nevertheless, most parents supported the program throughout the three years of enrollment despite the academic ups and downs. Their financial contribution also spurred other kinds of support, as this final section will show.

Emotional Guidance

There were many support mechanisms built into the Early College program to ensure that students would succeed, such as the College Success Seminar and the learning community model (Leonard, 2010). Some support mechanisms were designed to engage the parents. For example, the high school used an online program which alerted parents when a student's grade slipped below a designated point. In addition, the college faculty used the online learning platform, which provided the syllabus, assignments, and grade book for student and parent review. The Early College instructors refused to accept a failing grade on any assignment (the "no-fail" rule, Leonard, 2010). Students were required to make up missing work and to repeat assignments until they succeeded. All the instructors followed a policy of contacting parents by email whenever a homework assignment was missing. This was surprisingly effective. Given their $600 investment in the program, parents were more than willing to apply pressure from home, especially in Grade 10. In effect, the school experienced an unprecedented level of engagement between faculty and parents. This was an unexpected development, which reinforced the decision to require all parents to pay some portion of the tuition with future cohorts.

At one springtime recruitment meeting, some parents who did not enroll in the program openly questioned why the advantages of the program, such as the extra supports and the "no-fail" rule, were not freely available to every student at AHS. In short, they wanted to know why strategies that were obviously successful were not enforced in every classroom. The AHS principal offered two explanations. First, the hard fact was that the early college parents were paying for these supports. For example, the College Success course, as desirable as it would be for all the high school sophomores, cost over $10,000 per year. The second reason was harder to explain: Parent engagement was unreliable at AHS. The principal recalled past conversations with some parents about incomplete homework: "The trouble is, when we give the students a zero, you

won't make them keep writing. You just let them off! We call you, and you tell us not to call any more." On the other hand, the early college parents did support the faculty demands and so their children succeeded. Either the program unwittingly selected more engaged parents and/or the added factor of tuition payments stirred them to get more engaged.

There were many signs of the important role that parents played in helping their children succeed in the Early College program. The students often wanted to quit because, realistically, the work was hard. Parents had to bolster their children. One daughter said, "It's so hard; it's so hard!" and the parent told me, "She knows the work is more difficult. 'This is preparing you for the next level; you're required to do it, and of course it's going to be hard.' So, being the mother of the child, we have our moments."

As the students got older, the parental pressure was more subtle, as this father of a junior student recalled after a particularly poor report card:

I said that if that was the best he could do, then I would accept that, but if that was not the best he could do (and I knew he could) then "all you're doing is cheating yourself. And you're the one that's going to pay for it." He said he understood.

Another junior student said, "They still agree with the program and want me in it, but when I got a C, I had to talk with my mom about why it happened." However, most students succeeded academically and enjoyed consistent parental enthusiasm:

As long as I get good grades, they're fine.

My dad's all for it. He loves it so….

My dad wants me to keep doing it and wants me to take a few classes over the summer, too.

Parents were quick to notice the impact of the Early College program on students' study habits. The author asked parents if they noticed any outcomes from the College Success Seminar.

Father: She learned more how to study; last year she had way too many papers, all over the place….I think she's studying a little smarter. She really gets annoyed when she studies the wrong thing.

Mother: She's becoming more organized.

This parent also noticed the new study habits in her daughter:

Before, she was a C–D student and now she's A–B. Last year, homework, it was a nightmare. She and I fought about homework, about her Honors class, and she pretty much was constantly stressed and just, "Oh,

I have so much homework!" and this year I teach, and I pick her up around 4:00, and she goes to the library, she's doing her homework, so it does take her longer to process and to get written output out, but she's able to time manage. She knows, "This is what I need to do at school, and this is what I need to do at home, because I can do it." She's way more organized in the fact that she's writing everything down. Last year she wrote it down; this year she writes it down and color codes it.

One very encouraging sign was that the Early College program definitely stimulated college-going conversations, beginning in tenth grade. Here is a sample of a mother recalling her conversation with her daughter:

> This is getting you ready. This is what it's going to be like, no matter what college you go to. You're going to be spending hours doing homework. And this is the reality of it. So learn what you can; learn the study habits they're teaching you. And not going to college is not an option…. You will have to pay. You will be in debt. We're not doing the whole thing. No way; we can't.

Parents were able to attend to the immediate needs of their children without taking their eyes off the long-range benefits of the program.

Previously, this paper presented the case of a parent who removed her daughter from Honors-level courses where she was struggling and enrolled her in the Early College program instead. This parental attention, which seemed to ask, "Where is my daughter most likely to succeed this year?" could also have a negative impact on the Early College program. Three years of research demonstrated that the added rigor of the Early College courses had a depressing effect on students' GPA compared to the control group. While both groups improved their GPA from the freshmen to sophomore year, the experimental group improved less. A few parents and students with strong college aspirations pulled out of the Early College program after one year to attempt Honors courses instead (which carried a greater weight in GPA calculations). This student discussed his plans for switching to the Honors program:

> It's better for my GPA too. I'm really looking to raise that, and, um, one of the big reasons that I joined was to get the big experience of college, too, and kind of like, see myself grow. And now that I've done that one year, I feel more comfortable with it.

But, another student planned to reenroll and also revealed the parental influence: "I'm taking it next year. We talked about it because of my GPA, but she said the same thing, and you learn a lot more." Either way, students were making good decisions that would boost their college readiness.

Discussion

Educators offer various solutions to the college readiness challenge. Course alignment, college success courses, and college orientation experiences all help. However, there is nothing like practice with the real thing to build confidence and high self-efficacy concepts (Bandura, 1997). For this reason, early college high schools are springing up all over the country. They tend to be small with uncertain financial support. The AHS–NECC Early College program was part of a traditional high school and, thanks to the parental contribution, was sustainable financially.

A review of the research literature suggests that college readiness is more than just a set of academic skills and knowledge but also depends upon student choice and student dispositions as well as familial and social networks (Hernandez, 2011; Martinez & Klopot, 2005). Too often, research on college readiness has overlooked the important role of the family, particularly with underachieving students. This case study found that parental engagement played an important role in recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional support.

Many parents were thinking ahead to college even when their children were not. When some parents realized their children were not ready for Honors courses, the Early College program was a welcome alternative to steer them toward college. Some parents preferentially enrolled their child in the Early College program because of the College Success Seminar. However, other parents avoided the Early College program for equally college-bound reasons. These parents were convinced that Honors courses, which carried greater weight in GPA calculations, were the most promising route forward. A few families even pulled out of the Early College program after one year because of the decelerating effect on cumulative GPA. Both groups of parents demonstrated engagement for college readiness.

Assuming responsibility for the cost of college is an important aspect of college readiness. The cost alone can keep some students from attending college, no matter how ready they are in other respects. Many high schools offer seminars on financial aid, and AHS was no exception, but the Early College program offered some real-world experience, too. The program prompted parents and students to discuss the costs early in high school. They shared the responsibility; parents paid while students worked hard to earn credits. In some cases, students paid also. The tuition cost was annual and could be met with monthly payments, just like "real" college. Conceivably, some Early College students might qualify for a complete college financial aid package after graduation, but most parents seemed to conclude that, based on their income and

their child's accomplishments, a full ride to college was not in the future. For them, the Early College program provided a money-saving discount.

Parents always face some school-related costs, which could include school supplies, lunch money, uniforms, transportation, or fees for sports. However, the historic tradition of free public education forbids K–12 schools from charging tuition for courses. In this respect, the early college program crossed new policy boundaries. As other concerned parents noticed during the recruitment meeting, the Early College families were purchasing special academic services. While American parents often pay for dual enrollment courses (as previously discussed; see Abell, 2007), they are less likely to pay for concurrent courses that are part of the regular school day.

Some parents in the Early College program partnered closely with teachers for their child's academic success. The school certainly made a greater effort to engage parents. The newness of the program meant that the guidance department and school administrators paid extra attention and were more likely to contact parents with their concerns. The Early College teachers adopted new ways to engage parents, including Blackboard and regular emails. The Early College parents were also more engaged than the average parent at AHS. No doubt, the Early College program selected concerned parents since families volunteered to enroll. However, the students claimed that the financial commitment also evoked additional parental attention. Most of the evidence for parental engagement came from the sophomore year. As students matured and the program became routine, parents seemed to relax and take a more hands-off attitude. This confirmed other studies which report that parental engagement changes over time from a focus on student behaviors to a concern for programmatic outcomes and future prospects (Catsambis & Garland, 1997). Not surprisingly, there were more failing grades in the junior and senior years.

Teachers often question parental engagement because they do not see the parents show up at traditional parent–teacher open houses. This case study demonstrated that parental engagement took many forms. From the freshmen year, the Early College parents were thinking about the best academic options for their children. They were ready to take on additional financial responsibilities to help their children get ready for college. They were engaged in conversations at home with their children about academic choices, student grades, schedules, college prospects, and the financial cost of college. Jeynes meta-analytic study reinforced the importance of less obvious forms of parent engagement for urban student achievement:

> Subtle aspects of parental involvement such as parental style and expectations had a greater impact on student educational outcomes than some of the more demonstrative aspects of parental involvement such

as having household rules and parental attendance and participation at school functions. (Jeynes, 2007, p. 100)

Similarly, much of the parental support in this case study was behind-the-scenes but nonetheless crucial for student success and college readiness.

One of the strengths of this college readiness program was that it opened new pathways to students who wanted to consider college in their future, students who might easily be overlooked. First, there was the traditional route for top quartile students, which led through Honors courses, followed by some combination of AP and dual enrollment courses. This pathway was supplemented by the Early College program, which invited academically average students to also get ready for college. College readiness is increasingly important for all students. The Early College program, combined with strong parental engagement, opened the doors for underachieving students to get ready for college.

What about students who do not want to go to college? And what about the students in the lowest academic quartile? The President's blueprint for educational reform addressed both college and career readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). An increasing number of jobs, especially in the Commonwealth where health, biotechnology, computer technology, and finance dominate the market, require at least two years of college. The community colleges can well address this need. Other trades still require only a high school degree. Massachusetts provides regional vocational schools for some students. However, the AHS early college model could reasonably be paired with an early *trade* program that would involve partnerships with postsecondary trade or technical schools for construction jobs, health technicians, beauticians, or auto mechanics.

Case studies always present certain limitations. This researcher attempted to overcome internal validity issues through data triangulation; the voices of teachers, students, and parents offered multiple perspectives, which sharpened interpretations. The position as participant–observer threatened objectivity, but offered access to more data than would be available to an outside agency. Case study results are hard to generalize; nevertheless, the AHS–NECC Early College program is now being replicated in three other high school/community college partnerships in Massachusetts. The research studies emerging from this program will prove to be an informative and valuable addition to the college readiness literature.

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The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program: Providing Cultural Capital and College Access to Low-Income Students

Philip Evan Bernhardt

Abstract

This field report investigates how the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a college-readiness system targeting populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, provides students with consistent academic support while enrolled in a rigorous course of study. The report also addresses strategies AVID utilizes to engage students and families in the college preparation process as well as the various ways successful AVID programs foster a strong sense of community within schools. As a way to closely examine the depth and breadth of this well-regarded precollegiate program from a number of perspectives, four distinct but interrelated lenses are utilized. First, AVID is introduced to orient readers to its purpose, scope, and significance. Second, a brief review of research related to college access documents the barriers low-income students frequently face in the pursuit of higher education. This data further situates both the relevance and importance of the program. Third, a discussion of cultural capital draws attention to the multiple challenges low-income students encounter in school and documents the program's methods for facilitating both intellectual and affective growth. This analysis highlights how AVID's structure and philosophical orientation encourage and support the development of meaningful relationships among teachers, school staff, and program participants and their families. The article concludes by considering potential challenges administrators and teachers may confront when implementing AVID and offering practical recommendations that could benefit ALL students and their families.

Key Words: AVID, Advancement Via Individual Determination program, cultural capital, college access, low-income students, readiness, postsecondary education, engagement, barriers, supportive relationships, parents, family

Introduction

A number of years ago a colleague and I received administrative support to establish the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program in the high school where we taught. AVID, which began at Claremont High School in San Diego, California, is a nationally recognized in-school academic support program targeting student populations historically underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities. The primary goal of the AVID program is to "motivate and prepare underachieving students from underrepresented linguistic and ethnic minority groups or low-income students of any ethnicity to perform well in high school and to seek a college education" (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Linitz, 1996, p. 14). Since the program began in 1980, AVID has extended its reach into approximately 4,800 schools in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and 16 countries/territories and serves more than 425,000 students in grades 4–12 (AVID, 2012). During the summer of 2012, more than 22,000 educators from 44 states as well as Australia, Canada, Europe, Virgin Islands, and U.S. Department of Defense schools took part in AVID professional development training. Discussing the program's significance, New York University Professor of Education Pedro Noguera noted,

> AVID creates a classroom environment where kids are encouraged to take learning seriously, and, secondly, to see themselves as scholars. I'd like to expand that notion beyond school, after school, at home. AVID also creates an environment for peer support, and for kids, that's everything. If you can create an intellectual environment and peer support, it can have long-term effects. (Gira, 2004, p. 3)

While AVID's central focus is on providing consistent academic support to students while enrolled in a rigorous course of study, it also serves important social purposes that embed the program within the broader school community.

AVID students are usually recommended for the program by one or more of their teachers and/or their parents. Typically, these students are then asked to interview with the school's AVID coordinator and teachers to ensure there is a good fit and that the students are interested in and committed to the program's mission and purpose. While students can technically enter the program at any grade level, it is most beneficial if they become involved in middle school or as they enter high school. Serving as an elective in both middle and high school,

AVID creates opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which their schools function, develop strong relationships with their AVID classmates, become more involved in extracurricular activities, interact with individuals from a variety of professional fields, and learn specifics about the college application, financial aid, and enrollment processes. Additionally, schools with successful AVID models work hard to foster a strong sense of community by not only providing consistent opportunities for students to interact and connect with guidance counselors, career specialists, and other relevant school staff, but also by reaching out to AVID families to encourage them to become actively involved in supporting the program's mission.

There is also a longstanding emphasis within AVID's philosophy to build meaningful partnerships with local businesses and community-based organizations interested in offering mentoring support. The AVID program is not just focused on what happens between teacher and student; rather, its aim is to create a community of stakeholders genuinely committed to increasing the number of students who enroll and persist in four-year colleges as well as creating engaging, motivational learning environments that consistently support academic and affective development and the creation of dynamic relationships.

Serving as both an AVID teacher and the program's co-coordinator in a large, diverse high school, I was charged with a variety of challenging responsibilities. The most difficult of these tasks was asking teachers to genuinely consider whether our school was providing the necessary resources and opportunities for ALL students to enroll and succeed in a rigorous course of study and adequately prepare for college. Early efforts to engage teachers in meaningful conversations related to college readiness and AVID's core set of philosophies were not met with broad public support. Discussions about the process and criteria used to recommend students to classes resulted in the most heated debates among staff members. While I knew these discussions would be sensitive due to the potential to surface deeply held beliefs and attitudes related to learning, ability grouping, and equity, at times, the contentious environment it created isolated both the program and the individuals tasked with its administration.

Few teachers within the school demonstrated interest in engaging in meaningful dialogue about which students had an advantage in gaining access to advanced-level courses, teachers' course recommendation decisions, how much involvement students should have in the course selection process, and which students were hurt most by the course placement policies and practices that were in place. In fact, there seemed to be little interest in publicly investigating how the course recommendation process in our school disadvantaged certain students while privileging others. This lack of concern had consequences for

how some students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, experienced school and prepared for life after graduation.

Looking around the school, it was not difficult to identify many talented students who seemed to have little encouragement to enroll in advanced-level courses. Consequently, a majority of these students lost out on opportunities to academically prepare themselves for college. Considering this reality in the context of empirical research delineating the relationship between enrollment in advanced courses and college attendance, it was hard not to be concerned (see Adelman, 1999; Kelley-Kemple, Proger, & Roderick, 2011; King, 1996; Saavedra, 2011). Additionally, the fact that low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 1985) suggests this normative pattern not only requires attention, but a critical analysis. Summarizing the consequences of this common dynamic, Mickelson and Heath (1999) concluded, "Tracking creates a discriminatory cycle of restricted educational opportunities for minorities that leads to diminished school achievement that exacerbates racial/ethnic and social class differences in minority and majority school outcomes" (p. 570). Over the last 25 years, an extensive body of sociological and educational research has drawn attention to the inequities associated with curricular tracking. Low-income students, however, are still highly underrepresented in courses considered part of a high quality, rigorous academic curriculum.

What follows is a close examination of the various ways AVID supports the academic and social development of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, engages students and families in the college preparation process, and fosters a strong sense of community within schools. The report is divided into four distinct but interrelated parts. First, a brief analysis of relevant research related to college access documents the barriers low-income students frequently face in the pursuit of higher education. Second, a discussion of cultural capital within an educational context situates the various challenges students from low-income backgrounds commonly experience in school. Next, four practical examples highlight the various ways AVID provides students with access to highly valued forms of cultural capital and helps build community within the school by encouraging the development of meaningful relationships among teachers, school staff, and program participants and their families. The article concludes by considering the potential challenges administrators and teachers may confront when implementing the AVID curriculum and offering recommendations for the future.

It is important to establish that while I genuinely believe a degree from a four-year institution of higher education provides distinct economic, social,

political, and cultural advantages, I also acknowledge there are many other paths high school students can take to fulfill their dreams, desires, or needs. Additionally, I would not support nor advocate an educational policy mandating college for everyone. I do, however, believe that all students, regardless of background, need full access to the information and the types of academic and social experiences necessary to make informed decisions about life after high school.

It is also necessary to remind readers that the following discussion is situated within one particular discourse related to college readiness; thus, it is not meant to serve as a singular truth or a rigid set of prescriptions to be forced upon schools or teachers. Rather, it is my hope that the ideas presented will have the power to spark meaningful conversations about our role as educators, how we care for our students, and how we provide meaningful opportunities and spaces for students to become whoever they wish to be.

Contextualizing the Issue

Although current figures on college enrollment among low-income students suggest tremendous improvements have been made during the past 30 years, college participation rates for this demographic group falls well behind those of their middle- and upper-class peers (Haycock, 2006). In almost every year between 1972 and 2008, the immediate college enrollment rates of students from low-income families trailed the rates of those from high-income families by at least 20 percentage points (NCES, 2010). In 2008, the percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in two- or four-year colleges during the October immediately following high school completion included 81% of those from families in the highest income group, 63% from middle-income families, but below 52% for those in the lowest income group (NCES, 2010). Additionally, fewer than 9% of students growing up in low-income families earns a bachelor's degree by age 24 (Haycock, 2006). Commenting on this pattern, Stanford University Sociology Professor Sean F. Reardon argues, "We have moved from a society in the 1950s and 1960s, in which race was more consequential than family income, to one today in which family income appears more determinative of educational success than race" (quoted in Tavernise, 2012, p. 1). Clearly there is a need to take a closer examination of the patterns and structures underlying these academic outcomes.

Numerous researchers have documented the relationship between enrollment in high-track classes and college readiness and attendance. Many low-income students face multiple challenges that make it difficult to adequately prepare for and gain access to college. These factors include, but are

not limited to, an inability to secure financial aid, a lack of support in the application process, and insufficient academic preparation. Conducting research for the U.S. Department of Education, Adelman (1999) found that academic preparation is the most significant predictor of college success, and enrollment in a rigorous curriculum in high school prepares students with the knowledge, skills, experiences, and academic mindset that institutions of higher education expect. Kelly (2008) found only a small proportion of students enrolled in low-track classes transition into college preparatory classes during high school and remain enrolled. Consequently, students entering high school in low-track classes are likely to also finish in low-track classes and to be academically unprepared for the expectations and rigor of college.

Studies conducted by a number of researchers, including Kelley-Kemple et al. (2011), King (1996), and Saavedra (2011), identify that enrollment in advanced-level classes improves the likelihood of attending college. Unfortunately, low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992) and are less likely to be programmed into a rigorous college preparation sequence (Haycock, 2006; Oakes, 1985). Moreover, many urban and rural schools serving low-income populations do not offer the courses students need to be competitive in the college admissions process, and if they offer the classes, they are likely to be taught by unqualified teachers (Haycock, 2006). This imbalance, or what Darling-Hammond (2010) refers to as the "opportunity gap" present in many schools, can be described as "the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and school" (p. 28). Writing about this gap 18 years earlier, Wheelock (1992) posited:

> In many districts course enrollment patterns inside individual schools replicate this pattern—with poor, African-American, Latino, and students who are recent immigrants largely absent from courses that offer access to the higher-level knowledge needed for education success and broadened life opportunities. (p. 9)

In addition to a rigorous course of study, low-income students are more likely to attend college if they are connected to a school-based social network that not only supports academic development (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), but also explicitly provides information about issues directly related to postsecondary education. A lack of exposure to and understanding of these particular issues serves as a major barrier for low-income students (Wimberly & Noeth,

2004). Both McDonough (1997) and Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that low-income students benefit from guidance in selecting classes, developing career and college aspirations, and completing the college application process. To further illuminate the significance of providing students from low-income backgrounds with a strong network of academic and social support, it is useful to consider the power, utility, and significance of cultural capital within a school context.

School Spaces

When students enter school they are immediately situated into a complex system of stratification influencing academic, social, and emotional experiences. This educational hierarchy, which purposely separates students from one another, historically disadvantages those students from low-income populations (Apple, 1995, 2004). However, economics cannot solely be relied on to explain the disparities in educational attainment among students from different social classes. Bourdieu (1986) suggests "school success is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of talent and achievement" (as cited in Swartz, 1998, pp. 76–77). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) work, Lareau and Weininger (2003) articulate a useful definition of cultural capital. "Any given 'competence' functions as cultural capital if it enables appropriation 'of the cultural heritage' of a society, but is unequally distributed among its members, thereby engendering the possibility of 'exclusive advantages'" (p. 579). From this perspective, culture is understood as a resource that confers both status and power. Culture, then, can be thought of as "a form of capital with specific laws of accumulation, exchange, and exercise" (Swartz, 1998, p. 8).

To better understand the implications of cultural capital within an educational context, it is helpful to specifically consider Bourdieu's (1986) conception of cultural capital in its *embodied* state. This particular form of cultural capital, which differs from *institutional* and *objectified* states, is both consciously acquired and implicitly inherited through a process of socialization to certain cultural practices, norms, expectations, and assumptions. While this process of socialization takes place within the family unit, it also frequently occurs in hierarchal institutions like the school and workplace. Cultural capital in its embodied state is not easily or quickly transferrable; rather, it is acquired over time as it influences an individual's way of thinking and acting. Accumulating cultural capital in its embodied state "requires 'pedagogical action': the investment of time by parents, other family members, or hired professionals to sensitize the child to cultural dispositions" (Swartz, 1998, p. 76). Hence, those students

without strong foundations of academic, social, and emotional support, both inside and outside of school, are at a disadvantage.

Before moving on, it is pertinent to briefly highlight two strands of thinking situating the ideas presented so far. First, my present understanding of cultural capital is shaped by the following: cultural capital is influenced by dominant cultural values, norms, and beliefs; cultural capital provides various social, political, economic, and academic advantages to certain members of society; and cultural capital is unequally distributed to members of society. Second, cultural capital is everywhere; it has no clearly defined boundaries, its central characteristics are dependent on context, and it cannot be measured, counted, or tightly packaged to be consistently recognizable or identifiable. Hence, what constitutes cultural capital or describing one's access to its various forms is socially constructed, influenced by context, affected by power, and shaped by the continuously shifting meanings which underlie social discourse.

To better situate AVID as a form of cultural capital, it is useful to address the different ways the program provides consistent support to students enrolled in an academically rigorous course of study, creates opportunities for program participants and their families to engage in the college preparation process, and facilitates the development of a broad network of support mechanisms, both inside and outside the classroom, to assist students and their families in the pursuit of higher education. Because family plays such an integral role in students' academic successes and chances for college attainment, it makes sense to begin the following discussion by addressing the various ways AVID reaches out to families in an effort to get them directly involved with AVID's mission.

AVID as a Form of Cultural Capital

Fostering Meaningful Connections With Families

Although AVID is a school-based program that draws on the support and involvement of school personnel, family involvement is a primary goal. For the typical AVID student, the kinds of information, knowledge, understandings, and experiences necessary to prepare for and successfully gain admission into a postsecondary institution are often absent at home. Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) suggest that parents of first-generation college-goers may have limited ability to support their children in making critical college decisions beyond encouraging them to value education and strive for a college degree. Researching the involvement of low socioeconomic status African American parents in the college choice process, Smith (2009) found that while there is a high level of involvement towards high school completion within these families, shifting expectations from high school to postsecondary completion requires

coordinated efforts to help parents access and understand the college preparation process as early as middle school. Because typical AVID students lack a strong college-going tradition within their families, there are large knowledge and understanding gaps that need to be addressed.

For example, take into consideration the issue of selecting academic courses. Investigating how a system of tracking functions within a school and with what effects, Rosenbaum (1976) concluded parents are often at the mercy of difficult-to-navigate structures and school norms, and as a result, do not exert much influence on placements. In her landmark study on tracking, Oakes (1985) found that the "locus of control of track decisions" in the 25 middle and high schools in which she conducted research resided with counselors and teachers together; in 22 of the 25 schools, parents did not play a role in academic placement decisions (p. 57). While Kelly (2004) found that only a small number of parents directly intervene in course placement, other research suggests that parents, particularly those with higher levels of education and higher income levels, commonly play a larger role in their child's education than those with lesser schooling and economic resources (Gamoran, 1992; Lareau, 2003; McNeal, 1999; Useem, 1991, 1992). Hence, successful AVID programs reach out to parents and guardians to provide them with cultural capital that will empower them to support their child's academic endeavors and create a college going culture in their home, in addition to delivering basic information on college readiness and preparation. The two following examples demonstrate AVID strategies for building meaningful relationships with students' families.

First, throughout the school year, successful AVID programs organize workshops to educate parents and guardians about student success in middle and high school, college readiness, and postsecondary enrollment. These workshops provide a unique forum for family members to ask questions, engage in discussion, and meet other parents with students participating in AVID. These meetings also provide opportunities to learn about, for example, financial aid procedures, course taking, extracurricular activities, and how to create an enriching educational environment at home.

Although the AVID site coordinator is usually charged with arranging these gatherings, they typically involve other teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school staff directly involved with the program. The inclusion of school personnel provides a valuable opportunity for parents and guardians to meet and talk with many of the adults playing an integral role in the lives of their children, while also creating a sense of community and connection within both the program and the school. Other than back-to-school nights at the beginning of the academic year, it is rare that teachers and school staff get consistent opportunities to meet with family members to learn about students'

lives outside the classroom. This interaction, which also creates a setting for school personnel to learn more about their students lives outside of school, can provide valuable insights about how to more effectively respond to students' learning needs and nurture their strengths and interests. These workshops serve as one way AVID reaches out to parents in a concerted effort to create a functional community aimed at consistently supporting students' academic and affective development.

Second, in many AVID programs, parents or guardians are required to sign a written contract indicating that they will fully support their student's pursuit of higher education. Typically, this document outlines a commitment to help sustain student engagement and give encouragement, support AVID requirements (such as taking multiple advanced-level classes and participating in extracurricular activities), and become intimately involved in the college preparation process. This agreement serves as reminder to parents and guardians of their responsibility to actively support their children in the pursuit of postsecondary opportunities. Additionally, while there is no cost for students to be involved in AVID, this agreement creates a more formal connection between home and school by asking AVID parents and guardians to take a dedicated interest in their child's education by learning as much as they can about what is required for a high school diploma, what classes are important for college, the steps necessary to prepare for the college application process, and how to support intellectual and affective growth. During the school year, many AVID programs hold open houses as a way to directly connect to parents and provide opportunities for them to learn about the college readiness process. The AVID program pushes hard to create a stable bridge between the home and the classroom in an effort to get families more involved.

Developing a Web of Relationships

Highlighting the role of cultural capital in the creation of inequity, Amanda Lewis (2006) dismisses schools as the great equalizers and views them as places that provide access and privilege for some and discomfort, constraint, and discontent for others. "Capital creates options, choices, and increased chances for good schooling" (Lewis, 2006, p. 169), and those who have it and know how to use it are at a distinct advantage. Cultural capital is a central part of the schooling experience and "provides students who have it with multiple benefits" (Lewis, 2006, p. 171). Following this logic, it is critical for schools—which Apple (2004) argues enhance the ideological dominance of certain classes, certain knowledge, and certain assumptions—to help students (especially those from lower income families) negotiate the daily expectations, experiences, and realities of school. Hence, a central tenet of the AVID curriculum is to provide

students with a strong understanding about the various ways schools function and operate. Additionally, the curriculum provides many opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with teachers, administrators, and other school officials. This interaction enables students to develop a strong network of school-based support and a clearer understanding of school norms. In doing this, AVID helps students develop a web of relationships within the school to help foster connection, purpose, and consistent encouragement.

The AVID curriculum exposes students, many of whom will likely be the first in their family to attend college, to the types of experiences, knowledge, and language useful for navigating complex school bureaucracies and learning how schools function on a daily basis. To help accomplish this, students are taught to self-advocate, encouraged to take responsibility for their education, and exposed to various strategies for effectively collaborating and interacting with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel.

In their review of the AVID program, Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, and Mehan (1995) found AVID students were successful because they had access to school-valued cultural knowledge and were able to establish meaningful relationships with school personnel who were both capable and committed to providing academic and social support. This support, however, was "much more than giving students the fish they need to survive; it is teaching them how to fish, whatever waters they are in" (Stanton-Salazar et al., 1995, p. 30). In their evaluation of the AVID program in San Diego Public Schools, Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, and Villanueva (1994) reported that the success of AVID students was a direct result of teachers socializing students to both explicit and implicit institutional practices. Similarly, in an examination of the educational aspirations and anticipations among four groups of high school seniors, Lozano, Watt, and Huerta (2009) found AVID provided students with access to beneficial social and cultural capital that may have otherwise not been available to them.

More recently, Mendiola, Watt, and Huerta (2010) identified important components of the AVID program—such as Cornell note-taking, time management, organization, individual determination, group collaboration, and oral presentation skills—positively influenced the postsecondary educational progress of Mexican American college students who had participated in AVID. These particular skills, it can be argued, are not always explicitly taught in school; however, they are, in one form or another, forms of cultural capital that provide educational advantage to those individuals who develop them and understand how and when they are to be utilized.

The AVID curriculum directly addresses terminology such as grade point average, SAT, ACT, FAFSA, class change form, drop/add, AP/IB, and honor society. Strategies for organizing class notebooks, note taking, and tracking

grades and assignments become part of everyday routines. Additionally, AVID students are taught about the different academic paths they can select within each subject and what academic and social services the school provides. AVID teachers regularly meet with students to confer about course enrollment, discuss options for after graduation, and talk about the long term value and importance of education. In a multiple-case study of the retention behaviors of AVID students in eight high schools located in Texas and California, Watt, Johnson, Huerta, Mendiola, and Alkan (2008) noted that while structural issues such as course-taking and scheduling were challenging, AVID students had the proper support and scaffolding to navigate these barriers. For many low-income students, many of these concepts, processes, and procedures are unfamiliar. However, for those from middle- and upper-class households these ideas are often taught, discussed, explained, and reiterated at home and in conversations with peers. Developing a more informed understanding about how schools operate provides advantage, status, and access to numerous resources that are important for school success and college attainment.

Concerted Cultivation

Lareau (2003) argues concerted cultivation is a critical factor in determining whether or not students will enter school with those forms of cultural capital necessary for success. This process of cultivation, common among many middle- and upper-class parents, actively fosters the types of "talents, skills, ideas, and opinions" (p. 238) that bestow an understanding of how to develop relationships and that influence students' academic outcomes and social opportunities. This capital, Swartz (1998) asserts, "returns dividends in school, rewarding those with large amounts of incorporated cultural capital and penalizing those without" (p. 76). In this light, those students raised by parents who embrace concerted cultivation enter school at a clear advantage and will likely have more opportunities to access those forms of cultural capital most valued by education institutions and to experience academic success. As a way to combat the disadvantages many low-income students encounter in school, AVID teachers often take on a role aligned with Lareau's vision of concerted cultivation. This requires teachers to engage with students on a personal level to learn about the challenges they face inside and outside of school, provide academic, social, and emotional support, and do more than is traditionally expected of teachers.

In her study of class, race, and family life, Lareau (2003) found that upper-middle-class parents directly taught their children to be persistent and assertive in putting pressure on those in positions of power in school to accommodate their academic and social needs. Conversely, working class and poor parents

expected teachers and administrators to take a leadership role and do what is best for their child with little to no involvement from home. Hence, AVID teachers serve as mentors and strive to develop strong relationships with students, assist with course planning and placement, provide consistent academic support, and create a classroom environment conducive to both social and emotional growth. This approach also includes AVID teachers taking an active role in helping students navigate the college application and financial aid process and thoughtfully prepare for life after high school graduation.

In a study of first-generation college-going seniors enrolled in AVID, Watt et al. (2008) found those students enrolled in this program felt nurtured, supported, and had numerous opportunities to develop personal bonds with the AVID teachers. Additionally, AVID created a family-like atmosphere that positively influenced student morale, self-esteem, and determination. This study also revealed that high school seniors received the majority of their information about the college application and enrollment process from their AVID teachers. AVID teachers, they argued, make a difference in both the short and long term trajectories of their students (Watt et al., 2008). Mendiola et al. (2010) reported AVID students were able to form strong relationships and bonds with their AVID classmates; they concluded this consistent interaction positively influenced students' educational experiences in both high school and college. The students participating in the study also reported feeling tremendous support and guidance from AVID teachers and believed they were academically prepared for college as a result of participating in the program.

The Shaping of Identity

Henry Giroux (1983) argues cultural capital functions as a system of representations carrying meanings and ideas that directly influence how students think about and experience school. This conceptualization of cultural capital as both material and symbolic brings two important points to the forefront of this discussion. First, from this perspective, it can be suggested that, over time, cultural capital shapes how students view themselves. Thus, the formation of social groups, enrollment in certain classes, the capacity to build relationships with teachers, and even participation in afterschool activities are influenced by one's access to cultural capital. Second, those students without exposure to highly valued forms cultural capital are not often placed in classroom environments where they have opportunities to learn about the long-term importance of education. Consequently, they are not provided with the experiences or guidance necessary to prepare for postsecondary education.

To address these two specific concerns, AVID students are exposed to lessons, texts, films, and speakers focused on self-advocacy, the importance of

college, and the variety of professional opportunities available after high school. Additionally, students in the program are enrolled in an AVID elective class which meets with the same frequency as other academic classes. This helps AVID students establish a tight bond with goal-oriented peers and to develop beneficial academic dispositions. Mendiola et al. (2010) found AVID students formed meaningful relationships and bonds with other AVID students. These connections, they argued, positively influenced students' academic and social experiences in both high school and college. Likewise, Watt et al. (2008) concluded the family-like atmosphere of AVID was important to the development of students' morale, self-esteem, and determination.

Thus, the AVID curriculum provides opportunities for students to connect with an academically focused peer group, develop meaningful relationships, and develop a positive academic identity. This program, according to Mehan et al. (1994), helps to create a classroom environment where students can develop confidence and take academic risks; provides students with specific instruction in test-taking skills and the college application process; facilitates opportunities for students to create public markers of group identity (e.g., the AVID notebook, public presentations, a newspaper highlighting accomplishments); utilizes cooperative study/tutoring groups; and provides AVID students with many opportunities to visit colleges/universities.

Many low-income students slowly progress through school without a tangible understanding of the ultimate purpose of schooling or the impact education has on future social and economic mobility (Spring, 2007). As a result, many children's identities are shaped by daily struggles rather than by long-term aspirations and a well-built understanding of the choices available to them after high school. For many low-income children, because they come from families who operate with a sense of constraint and accept the actions of people in charge (Lareau, 2003), they are at a disadvantage. Consequently, they are placed in academic courses that do not provide a deep understanding of higher education, how one gets there, or how to plan for it. Martinez and Klopott (2005) argue that two important ways AVID promotes the success of low-income and minority students in terms of achievement and increased enrollment in postsecondary education is by providing a personalized learning environment specifically focused on individual needs and by creating opportunities for students to develop meaningful social networks and relationships.

"One of the best predictors of whether a child will graduate from college is whether or not his or her parents are college graduates" (Lewis, 2006, p. 8). A defining characteristic of AVID is that many of the students enrolled will be one of the first in their family to attend college. This focus on life after high school is a fundamental component of the AVID curriculum because it provides students with identity development oriented toward the future.

Looking Toward the Future

Potential Challenges

Three particular issues related to the possible challenges schools may encounter when trying to adopt and implement the AVID program deserve thoughtful consideration. First, allocating and increasing funds to develop AVID programs will enable schools to address the academic and social needs of those populations historically underrepresented in postsecondary education. During difficult economic times, however, it is common for the resources supporting AVID and other similar programs to be cut from district and school budgets. Therefore, it is important for teachers, administrators, and other school officials to consider how to incorporate the AVID mission into each school's goals, expose teachers to core AVID philosophies, and develop a school culture that embodies a concern for equitable educational practices.

Second, there needs to be a shift in attitude regarding student achievement. Past studies indicate that many Americans believe responsibility for their accomplishments and success primarily rests on individual efforts (Lareau, 2003). However, this conclusion deserves critical inquiry because it diminishes the socialization process that every child undergoes once they enter school. In addition, the capitalistic idea that those who work the hardest will eventually benefit has little credibility in the context of cultural capital.

Schools are not politically, socially, or economically neutral places. When children from lower income families enter into these spaces unprepared to deal with unanticipated expectations, unfair assumptions, and marginalizing norms, it places them at a clear disadvantage. This situation leads to both social and academic stratification, quietly aids in the establishment of institutionalized academic barriers, and exemplifies how schools provide opportunity and success for some but serve as a mechanism of constraint for others.

Finally, there are many schools implementing curriculums and academic programs aimed at closing the gaps between low-income students and their middle- and upper-class peers. These particular examples need to serve as both symbolic and concrete representations of reform. When AVID was initially founded in 1980 by Mary Swanson (1980), she was responding to the reality she dealt with everyday in her classroom. Her mission to provide a curriculum that provides students with direct access to highly valued knowledge, skills, and resources dramatically changed the lives of thousands of children.

The AVID program can serve as a model for schools that wish to empower students born into socioeconomic circumstances that make consistent academic success less likely. AVID serves those students who would otherwise fall through the cracks and continue to wander from grade to grade and class to

class without a well grounded understanding of why they are in school. "Children arrive at school with different socially acquired resources and generally leave with differentiated rewards" (Lewis, 2006, p. 5). In an effort to address this dilemma, the AVID curriculum teaches students how to access and utilize cultural capital so that they will have the knowledge to negotiate the day-to-day challenges of school life, succeed in an academically rigorous course of study, and prepare for college. As a result, students become keenly aware of social and academic opportunities both inside and outside of school, gravitate towards a more successful peer group, and gain a broader perspective regarding the importance of education. While AVID is not the only approach to accomplish this, it serves as both a philosophical and practical model to positively influence the academic and social lives of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Recommendations for the Future

This discussion leaves a number of unanswered questions about the purpose, significance, and role of AVID within school communities. For example, how can all students and their families benefit from the program's curricular approach and philosophical commitments? Would all students benefit from the types of support mechanisms the AVID program provides? How can information about college readiness be effectively disseminated to all families, regardless of background, so they can take an active part in the college preparation process? With these questions in mind, a number of final recommendations are suggested below.

Bring "AVID Strategies" to the Larger School Community so ALL Students Benefit

Although AVID is an extremely important and successful program, in most schools where it exists, there are a limited number of students who can participate. This limit, however, is not due to an exclusive recruiting process or an elite attitude; rather, it can be attributed to challenges and constraints associated with budgeting, scheduling, staffing, and school space. With that said, one way to counter this issue is to make sure the core concepts that have historically defined the AVID program—such as its focus on organizational and study skills, enrichment and motivational activities, and college preparation—become more central to the overall student experience.

For example, most content area teachers just expect students to enter their classes with a clear understanding of how to be academically prepared, study for tests, and develop an effective system for taking notes. AVID teachers, however, explicitly teach these skills and operate under the assumption that these are lifelong capabilities that need to be taught and can always be further honed.

Likewise, AVID students have consistent opportunities throughout the school year and summer to learn about the various processes associated with the college admission process. Although providing this information is a responsibility that has been traditionally assigned to guidance counselors, these individuals, no matter how dedicated they are, just do not have the time to fully address all the questions, concerns, misconceptions, and needs of the large student loads they are typically assigned (Aydın, Bryan, & Duys, 2012).

Additionally, AVID is focused on the development of the whole child, whereas educators, particularly those at the high school level, are expected to spend the majority of their time teaching and transmitting content knowledge and understanding. While a strong emphasis on content is certainly important and central to the work of teachers, students are likely to improve their performance and be more engaged if more class time is spent on fostering study skills, building academic confidence, discussing postsecondary options and trajectories, and collaborating with professionals from the field to reinforce what is being taught and discussed in the classroom. All students would benefit from the types of support AVID provides; integrating a number of AVID's core strategies into a schoolwide plan of action would yield tremendous benefits for all students and teachers.

Create a Climate of College Readiness for ALL Students

While the primary goal of AVID is to increase the number of students who enroll in and persist in four-year colleges, this is not typically an explicit goal of most middle or high schools, especially those serving large populations of low-income and minority students. When a student enters AVID, college attainment becomes a central part of the discourse; it becomes part of the lexicon. Unfortunately, for many students, this narrative does not continue once they leave the AVID classroom. There is this assumption among many teachers that "others" are responsible for providing students with critical information about the college readiness and preparation process. However, if students, particularly those from lower income backgrounds, are not consistently engaged with this process during school hours, many are unlikely to receive it at home. One way to address this dilemma is to make college attainment a consistent message that all students are exposed to on a daily basis. Creating a school community that embodies a college-going culture may not, by itself, dramatically alter postsecondary matriculation rates; nonetheless, it is an immensely important part of disrupting current norms within the American education system.

Provide Ongoing College Readiness Workshops for ALL Families

Similar to the idea of providing all students with consistent access to the types of research-based pedagogical and college preparation strategies utilized

within the AVID curriculum, it makes sense for school-based AVID programs to work closely with career services staff, guidance counselors, and community organizations to expand their reach and engage family members of all the students within a school. Engaging family members of AVID students, particularly parents and guardians, is a core element of the program's philosophy, and over the years this approach has helped create strong connections between home life and the classroom. It would be beneficial if this strategy were implemented at the school level to promote the development of a college-going culture and increase parental involvement. Community is a dynamic that involves many moving parts. AVID's model of engaging families in an effort to build relationships with school staff, support achievement, and prepare students for postsecondary education starting as early as elementary or middle school are both attainable and admirable goals.

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The Enduring Influence of School Size and School Climate on Parents' Engagement in the School Community

Lauri Goldkind and G. Lawrence Farmer

Abstract

This study sought to examine the direct and indirect associations between school size and parents' perceptions of the invitations for involvement provided by their children's school in a school system that has actively attempted to reduce the negative effects of school size. Using data from the New York Public Schools' annual Learning Environment Survey, path analysis was used to examine the role that school climate plays in mediating the relationship between school size and parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement. Results from an analysis of middle and high school parents who participated in the annual school survey provided evidence that parents' perceptions of safety and of respect from the school mediated the relationship between school size and perceptions of the extent of the invitations for involvement provided by the school. The indirect effect of school size via perception of safety and respect was larger than the direct effect of school size on parents' perceptions of invitation for involvement.

Key Words: school size, climate, urban, middle, high, small schools, reform, mediation analysis, parents, engagement, family involvement, safety, respect

Introduction

Parental involvement in schools continues to be a critical issue for the stakeholders of the nation's education system (i.e., teachers, parents, educational

administrators, policymakers, etc.; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fege, 2000; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010; Teicher, 2007). Parents' involvement as educators in the home, participants on school committees, and advocates for school reform both outside and within the system has been found to have positive impacts both individually, resulting in increased academic performance of the recipient daughter or son, and on the school community as a whole (Fan & Chen, 2001; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Walsh, 2010). For those seeking to promote parental involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) provide a framework which identifies associated factors. In this model, the school environment (school climate), teachers, and children contribute to parents' motivation to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The extent to which both the school and their children invite parents and provide opportunities for involvement shapes the nature and extent of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The school improvement/reform literature has focused on the school's structure and management practices as important aspects of the school which shape parents' perceptions of the invitations for involvement. School reform models, for example, "Success for All" (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989) and the Social Development Model (Comer & Haynes, 1991), seek to promote parental involvement by making changes in school governance which will increase the opportunities for parental involvement (Magolda & Ebben, 2007). School reform efforts targeting school size also seek to promote greater student and parental involvement (Hartmann et al., 2009; Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). In the face of these reform efforts, there continues to be a need to better understand how structural aspects of school, for example school size, are related to parents' perception of the extent to which the school welcomes parental involvement.

Literature Review

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), using a psychological framework, view parental involvement as having its beginnings in a set of perceptions parents have about their role as a parent, their self-efficacy within the school domain, and opportunities and invitations for involvement they receive from their child and the school personnel. Perceived opportunities for involvement focus on parent perception of the extent to which the school and their child want them to be involved. While limited, the literature indicates that children's stage of social–cognitive development and approaches to learning are all factors that are associated with the types of invitation for involvement provided to parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The decline in parental involvement that is associated with the transition from middle to senior high school is often

attributed to parents' natural response to their child's increasing developmental need for autonomy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Aspects of the school environment such as staff attitudes towards parents and numbers of communication attempts to parents have been found to be associated with parental involvement and the nature of the invitations for involvement provided by the school (Lavenda, 2011).

School Size and Academic Progress

The structure and quality of the school environment is believed to play an important role in providing opportunities for student and parental involvement. Large, impersonal, bureaucratic comprehensive schools are believed to present many barriers to involvement (Meier, 1997). Case studies of effective alternative schools provide evidence of the importance of school size in promoting involvement (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Attending small general education secondary schools has been associated with improved student achievement (Cotton, 1996; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002; Haller, Monk, & Tien, 1993; Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2008). Research has also shown that small schools promote more equitable access to academically demanding courses (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993), more equitable gains in achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Lee & Smith, 1995), and lower dropout rates (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Kahne et al., 2008; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987).

Gardner, Ritblatt, and Beatty (2000) found that the dropout rate was significantly higher in the larger California public high schools than in small schools. Their finding is consistent with the previous investigations in examining dropout and schools size (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). The general belief is that in small schools, adolescents develop a sense of belonging, and when young people are part of a small, connected environment, they are less likely to drop out of school (Gardner et al., 2000).

The bonds that young people make with their peers and adults are needed to facilitate the development of social capital which promotes successful school completion (Coleman, 1988). There is evidence that school climate improves when larger schools are converted into smaller ones (Hartmann et al., 2009; Huebner, Corbett, & Phillippo, 2007). In the late 1990s, we witnessed the reorganization of schools around the country focused on reducing the size of schools (Hartmann et al., 2009). By 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had made grant awards totaling approximately 1.7 billion dollars to school districts seeking to create smaller school settings for their students.

School Size and Parental Involvement

Mechanisms by which school structural variables are associated with the behavior of parents and their children have not received a great deal of attention in the literature (Datar & Mason, 2008). Additionally, much of the work examining the association between school size and parental involvement has focused on class size during the primary grades K–3 (Datar & Mason, 2008). Studies of class size provide evidence that, during the primary school years, parental involvement is associated with class size in a complementary and substitutable manner (Bonesrønning, 2004; Walsh, 2010). For example, in the study of Norwegian primary school children, decreases in class size were found to result in increases in parental involvement. In a study of United States middle and senior high school students, increases in school size were associated with decreases in parents' volunteer activities (Walsh, 2010). While the work of Bonesrønning (2003, 2004, 2010) and Walsh (2010) provide insight into the role school size might play on parents' perceptions and their potential involvement in education, more attention to other potential mediators is needed.

School Size and Safety and Respect

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of parental involvement, along with the existing school climate (Hoy & Miskel, 2005) and school violence (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000) literature, highlight the role that perceptions of school climate play in shaping students', teachers', and parents' behavior. A comprehensive case study of 14 effective alternative high schools carried out in the latter part of the 1980s provided evidence of the importance of creating a school climate that is respectful of the student's and family's needs as a critical component in facilitating both student and parent involvement which led to improved academic achievement (Wehlage et al., 1989). Motivated in part by an understanding of the importance of creating a safe and respectful learning environment as a contributor to a school's effectiveness, several school reform initiatives that focused on reducing school size in order to create a school climate supportive of high achievement were developed in the early 1990s (Neiman, 2011). Several of the prominent reform efforts include the School District of Philadelphia's "Going Small" initiative (Benson & Borman, 2010) and similar initiatives in the New York City Public Schools and Chicago Public Schools, both funded out of a 1.7 billion dollar fund established by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Lachat, 2001). The New York City Public Schools have moved through three waves of small-schools-based reforms starting in the 1970s (DiMartino, 2009). A study of the 2006 graduates of 14 small schools established in 2002 provided evidence of the

potential for these schools to promote safety and respect within the school setting, along with positive academic engagement and performance (Huebner et al., 2007).

Aims of the Present Study

Building on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model of parental involvement, this study investigates the potential mediating role that a parent's perception of the extent to which their child's school provides a safe and respectful environment plays in the relationship between school size and perceptions of the invitations for involvement provided by the school. Green et al. (2007) describe invitations for parent participation as schools presenting explicit opportunities to participate via open school nights and parent–teacher conferences, as well as implicit environments that encourage participation, such as parent literature written in accessible language, welcoming greetings when parents are dropping students off at school, and otherwise creating a climate where parents can be comfortable helping students to assimilate into the school culture.

This study sought to determine if parents' perceptions of the school climate in the areas of safety and respect mediates the relationship between the enrollment size of a school and parents' perceptions of the degree to which the school provides opportunities for involvement (i.e., opportunities for communication and participation in school activities). An analysis of secondary data from the New York City Department of Education's Learning Environment Survey (LES), completed by parents in the Spring of 2008 was used to examine the study's mediation hypothesis. Figure 1 diagrams the hypothesized relationships among enrollment, school climate, and parental involvement that will be examined in this study. The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: Enrollment size is directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H2: Enrollment size is directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.

H3: Safety and Respect are directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H4: Safety and Respect are directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.

H5: Safety and Respect mediate the relationship between enrollment size and parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H6: Safety and Respect mediate the relationship between enrollment size and parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.
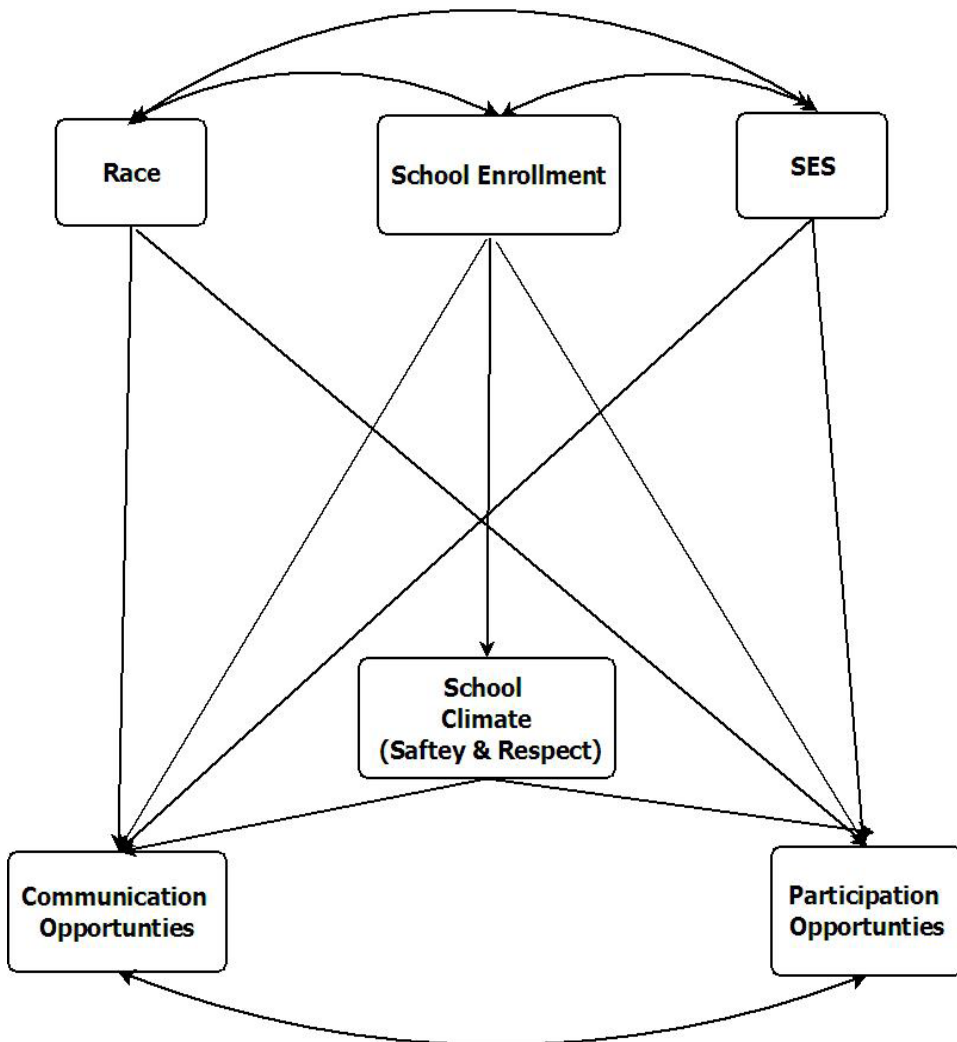

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Methods

Sample and Design

This study is based on an analysis of secondary data from the 2008 parents' version of the annual New York City Department of Education's Learning Environment Survey (LES). First implemented in 2007, the LES is the largest survey of its kind in the U.S. and asks all 1.5 million public school parents, teachers, and 6th- through 12th-grade students about a variety of topics related to the quality of their school experience (Nathanson et al., 2013) The units of analysis in this study are schools, in particular, middle and senior high schools. Those schools providing services primarily to special education youth or other alternative educational programming, for example, schools designed to transition youth from the juvenile justice system back into the general education program, were excluded from this study. School of special emphases, for example, magnet and charter schools, were included in the analysis only if they serviced middle and senior high school students and were not primarily serving a special education population. For the purposes of this study, only general education middle and senior high schools with parent response rates of 30% or higher were included. This response rate cut off was set in order to insure that each school had an adequate representation of their parents in the sample. Approximately 70% of the middle and senior high schools surveyed had parental response rates of 30% or higher.

Certainly, the use of a cutoff score like 30% raises the question of whether the "included" schools, that is, the schools with parental participation rates greater than or equal to 30%, differ from schools which have lower participation rates (i.e., the "excluded" schools). For two variables, the proportion of students receiving a free or reduced fee lunch and the proportion of students who were Black or Latino, both of which were available for the study sample and the population of schools from which the sample was drawn, negligible differences were found between the distributions of the included and excluded schools (details available upon request from the first author).

We have reason to believe that a response rate of approximately 30% is typical for a survey of this type. For example, The Fort Worth Independent School District's 2011–2012 Parent Survey report indicates a response rate of 28.3%, an actual decrease of three percentage points from the prior year's survey (Morrissey & Yuan, 2012). The Los Angeles Unified School District's average parent response rate in 2012 was only 18% (LAUSD, 2012).

Endogenous Variables

Two areas of invitations for involvement were assessed by the survey: Participation and Communication Opportunities.

Participation Opportunities

All composite scores for the various subscales used in this study were created by the school district. Individual parent responses were not made available to the researchers. All composite scores were based on an average of the parents' responses for each school. Eight items were used to assess parents' perceptions of the extent to which, over the recent academic year, the school encouraged caregiver participation either by inviting them to a school function or by designing school activities in a manner that would facilitate caregiver participation. Some of the items asked about attitudes; others asked about the frequency of specific behaviors. Example items included: "My child's school makes it easy for parents to attend meetings by holding them at different times of day, providing an interpreter, or in other ways." and "I feel welcome in my child's school." Parents responded to items like this one using a rating scale that ranged from 0 "Strongly Disagree" to 10 "Strongly Agree." Items asking about frequency of specific behaviors included the following example: "How often during this school year have you been invited to a workshop, program, performance, or other event at your child's school?" Parents responded to items like this one using a rating scale that ranged from 0 "Never" to 10 "More than once a month." The average rating for the eight items was used to create the composite score for the subscale. The secondary data set available for analysis only contained the school-wide composite score of the measures. Higher composite scores indicated that parents at the school perceived that the school provided more opportunities for participation in school activities. Thus, the unit of analysis was the school, not individual parents.

Communication Opportunities

As was the case with the Participation Opportunity measure, individual items were not made available, and the unit of analysis was the school. The Communication Opportunities subscale on the survey measured a parent's perception of the extent to which the school provided opportunities for the parent to communicate with school personnel about their child's academic progress and behavior. This subscale consists of 10 items. Example items included: "The school keeps me informed about my child's academic progress." and "The school contacts me when my child breaks school rules." High scores indicated parents' agreement with the idea that the school provided information about its educational goals and offered appropriate feedback on each student's learning outcomes. Parents responded to items using a rating scale that ranged from 0 "Strongly Disagree" to 10 "Strongly Agree." The data set available for secondary analysis only contained the composite measures. Higher composite scores indicated that parents at the school perceived that the school provided more

opportunities for communication with parents about their children's progress in school.

Exogenous Variables

Student Race/Ethnicity

For the purpose of this paper, student race/ethnicity has been operationalized as the proportion of each school which is Black and/or Latino.

Student Socioeconomic Status

School socioeconomic status (SES) is operationalized as the proportion of the students in each school receiving a free lunch.

Enrollment

Enrollment size (or enrollment) refers to the total number of students on a schools official roster. This variable is reported annually.

Mediator Variable: Safety and Respect

The subscale Safety and Respect assessed parents' perceptions of the extent to which the school worked to develop a school environment focused on keeping individuals free from physical or emotional harm. Ten items made up this subscale on the parents' survey. Parents responded to the items using a ten-point rating scale. Example items included: "My child is safe at school," and "Discipline is fairly enforced." Parents responded to items like these using a rating scale that ranged from 0 "Strongly Disagree" to 10 "Strongly Agree." The school district recoded negatively worded items when appropriate (e.g., "School staff are disrespectful to students."). High scores indicated perceptions of a positive school climate. The data set available for secondary analysis only contained the composite of the measures; the average rating for the ten items was used to create the composite score for the subscale.

Analysis Strategy

Descriptive analysis will be reported below. Figure 1 provides the conceptual model that will be estimated to evaluate the study's hypotheses. The path analysis model will be estimated using full-information maximum likelihood in Mplus 7.0. The bootstrapped-*t* method (Dang et al., 2011) will be used to estimate the significance of the indirect effects. Estimation of the statistical significance of the indirect effect using the bootstrapped-*t* method has been shown to be more robust than other methods, for example, the Sobel test (Sasser & Bierman, 2011).

Results

School Characteristics

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for the schools that participated in the study. A total of 545 (73%) of the 727 possible schools were included in the sample. Of the schools included, 42.7% were middle schools (grades 6–8), 9.7% were middle–senior high schools (grades 6–12), and 47.6% were senior high schools (grades 9–12). Approximately 30% of the total population that met the selection criteria for this study was excluded from the analysis because their response rates dropped below 30%. The middle-only schools declined by 40%, the middle–senior high schools declined by approximately 29%, and the senior high schools-only schools by approximately 18%. The schools ranged in size from new charter schools with enrollments under 50 to large, traditional high schools with enrollments above 4,900. Lastly, all five boroughs of New York City were represented in the sample in a manner that was not markedly different from the representation in the population.

Table 1. 2008 Survey Data: Sample Characteristics

	Percentages	
	Sample (*N*= 545)	Total Population (*N*= 747)
School Type		
Middle	42.7	49.7
Middle/Senior High	9.7	9.6
Senior High	47.6	40.7
Enrollment Size (total student enrollment)		
42–200	14.6	13.4
201–400	30.0	29.0
401–600	29.3	27.0
601–800	6.5	7.2
801–1000	6.5	6.6
1001–1200	4.9	4.7
1201+	8.2	12.0
Borough		
Bronx	27.4	26.8
Brooklyn	29.5	31.6
Queens	14.8	15.3
Manhattan	24.4	23.4
Staten Island	3.9	2.9

Table 2 contains the product moment correlation matrix along with the means and standard deviations for the study variables. There were approximately 2.5% of missing data. Following a set of procedures outlined by Mertler and Vannatta (2010), distributions of the variables were examined visually with boxplots and bivariate graphs, and a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was carried out. With the exception of enrollment, there was no evidence of any serious violation of the normality or linearity assumptions. Following the recommendations of Mertler and Vannatta (2010), extreme outliers, variables with z-score greater than +3 or less than -3, were recoded to the highest values. School enrollment ranged from 42 to 4,944 with a mean of approximately 590. The natural log of the enrollment was taken to reduce skew. There were significant associations among enrollment and the other study variables. In all cases, higher enrollment was negatively associated with parents' perceptions of safety and respect, invitations for engagement, and communication. Also, there were positive associations among safety and respect, invitations for engagement, and communication.

Table 2. Variables Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Communication	---					
2. Participation	.09	---				
3. School Climate	.80	.80	---			
4. Enrollment	-.27	-.19	-.27	--		
5. Student Race	.26	.16	.02	-.31	--	
6. Socioeconomic Status	.17	.08	.05	-.22	.67	--
Mean (Standard Deviation)	7.74 (.53)	7.65 (.48)	8.32 (.55)	67.53 (71.94)	78.91 (26.13)	76.28 (18.25)

Note: All correlations were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Study Hypotheses Results

H1: Enrollment size is directly related to parents' perception of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H2: Enrollment size is directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.

Hypotheses 1 (H1) and 2 (H2) state that enrollment size will be directly related to both the parents' perceptions of participation and communication

opportunities. These hypotheses were tested in the context of a "direct (total) effects only" path model (Figure 2) which also included percent Black/Latino and percent receiving a free school lunch as confounders. The direct effect of school enrollment on communication ($\beta_{\text{enrollment size} \rightarrow \text{Communication}}$ = -.20, p < .05) and on participation ($\beta_{\text{enrollment size} \rightarrow \text{Participation}}$ = -.15, p < .05) are, as expected, inversely and significantly related to both outcomes. In substantive terms, parents in larger schools report fewer opportunities for both communication and participation with the adults responsible for educating their children. Given that both direct effects are statistically significant, we move on to consider the role of school climate as a potential mediator of these direct effects.
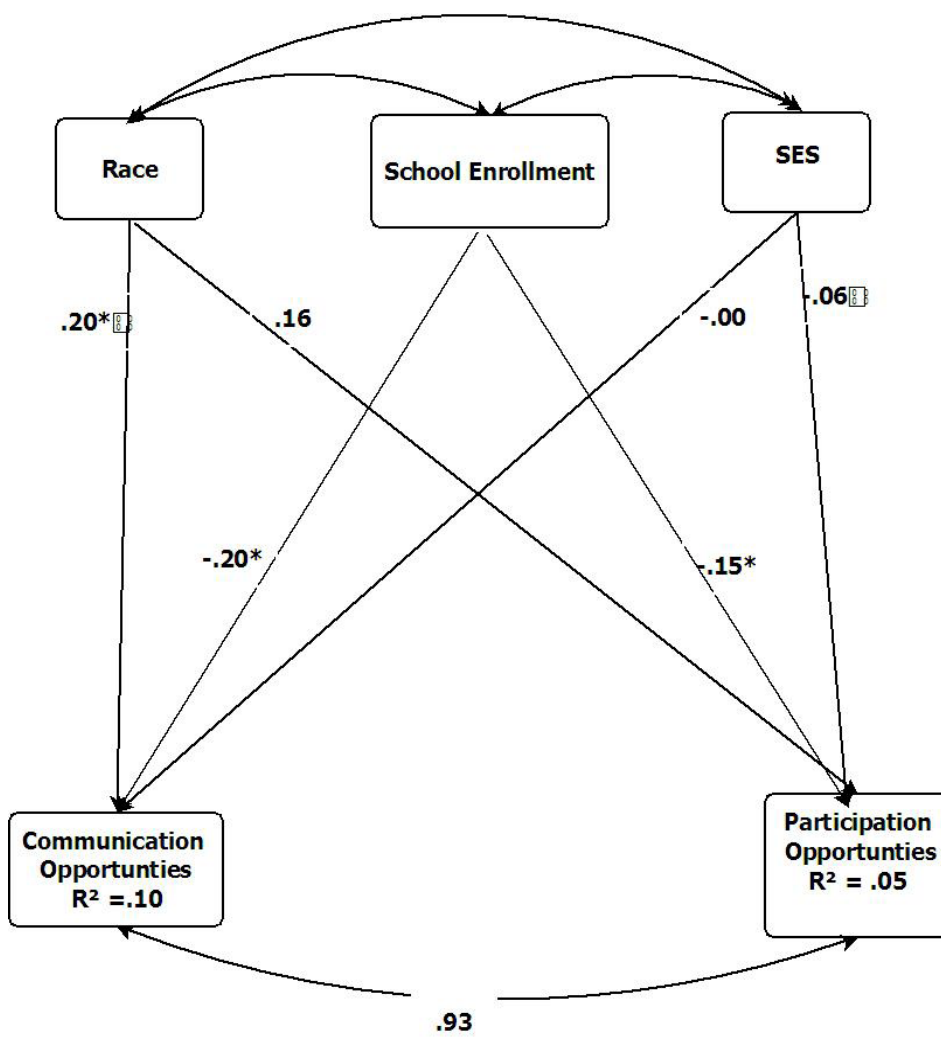

Figure 2. Direct Effects Model

H3: Safety and Respect is directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H4: Safety and Respect is directly related to parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.

Parents' perceptions of the extent to which the school environment is both physically and emotionally safe for their children are, as hypothesized, positively associated with parents' perceptions of the opportunities the school provides for both communication and participation in the school ($\beta_{\text{Safety \& Respect} \rightarrow \text{Communication}}$ = .80, $p < .05$; $\beta_{\text{Safety \& Respect} \rightarrow \text{Participation}}$ = .82, $p < .05$).

H5: Safety and Respect mediates the relationship between enrollment size and parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for communication between the school and parents.

H6: Safety and Respect mediates the relationship between enrollment size and parents' perceptions of the extent to which schools provide opportunities for parents to participate in school activities.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 are necessarily considered in the context of an augmented path model in which the presumptive mediator, Safety and Respect, is now included as an additional endogenous variable. As seen in Figure 3, and in marked contrast to their counterparts in Figure 2, the direct effect of school enrollment on communication ($\beta_{\text{enrollment size} \rightarrow \text{Communication}}$ = .03, $p > .05$) and the direct effect of school enrollment on participation ($\beta_{\text{enrollment size} \rightarrow \text{Participation}}$ = .09, $p < .05$) are noticeably smaller than the direct effects of school enrollment on communication and participation in the direct effects model and as shown in Figure 2 (i.e., -.20, $p < .05$ and -.15, $p < .05$).

Summary

There is evidence that the negative relationships between enrollment size, communication, and participation opportunities are mediated through a parent's perception of the extent to which the school environment is both physically and emotionally safe for the child. However, the extent to which this is the case varies by outcome. Specifically, the association between school enrollment (i.e., school size) on communication opportunities is completely mediated by safety and respect, whereas most, but not all, of the association of school size on participation opportunities is so mediated. That is to say, the association of school size on participation is partially mediated by school size. For both outcome variables, the mediated effect was larger than the direct effect, especially the indirect effect of school size on communication opportunities. (IE = -.21, .95 CI

(-.30, -.13) is the product of the direct effect of school size on school climate (β = -.267, p < .05) and the direct effect of school climate on communication opportunities (β = .80, p < .05). With regard to participation opportunities, the indirect effect (IE = -.22, .95 CI (-.31, -.13) is the product of the direct effect of school size on school climate (β = -.267, p < .05) and the direct effect of school climate on participation opportunities (β = .82, p < .05).
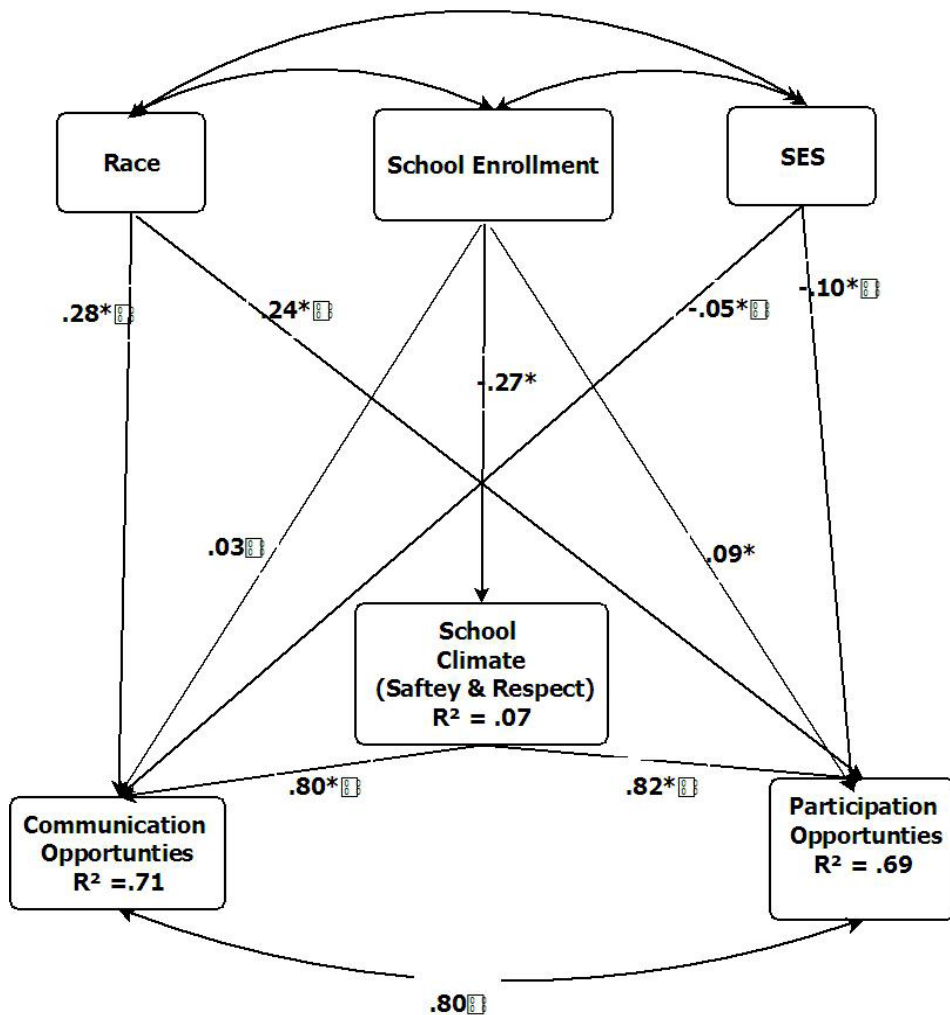

Figure 3. Path Model Direct and Indirect Effects

Discussion

Maximizing parental participation in the school community is a critical objective of various school reform initiatives. This study represents an initial attempt to test the role of school climate as a mechanism which may facilitate parental perceptions of the opportunities provided by the school for parental participation. Smaller schools have been found to be more effective in providing opportunities for parental participation than larger schools (Walsh, 2010). For example, smaller schools, precisely because they are smaller, have been able to emphasize relationships among their stakeholders, for example, prioritizing school–parent relationships, which in turn promote parental participation and ultimately enhance academic achievement.

This investigation has identified the importance of two aspects of school climate, specifically, the safety which characterizes the school environment and the respect shown by the members of the school community to one another. We argue that school climate is an important "conduit" potentially influencing the effect of school size on both communication and participation opportunities for parents. We have tested this claim by developing a path analysis model which empirically evaluates whether and, if so, to what extent, data collected from the parents in the largest school system in the United States can be said to support this claim. Our findings indicate that schools of different sizes report corresponding differences in the safety and respect which can be said to characterize them. These safety and respect differences, in turn, seem to affect the levels of parental engagement in these schools. In more substantive terms, our findings indicate that larger schools are generally characterized by less safety and less respect, and this type of school climate suppresses the level of communication and opportunities for involvement as perceived by parents of students in these schools.

Needless to state, this is not a welcome state of affairs. It would be useful and important to identify factors in the school environment which might buffer or mitigate the negative impact of school size on school involvement transmitted via the climate of unease that often characterizes our larger schools. Identifying these potential moderators of this indirect effect of school size on parental involvement would seem to be the logical next step. In addition, there are almost certainly other mediators of the causal process by which school size affects school involvement.

Aside from the identification of additional factors which would enhance our ability to better explain parental involvement, we also recognize that we have estimated an aggregate model, that is, a model in which the unit of analysis is the school; therefore, our conclusions can only be said to characterize

schools per se. This type of model, while appropriate for this purpose (i.e., characterizing schools), eliminates the individual variability among the parents in these schools.

It would be a useful complement to this study to be able to test our model using the individual parents as the units of analysis. Finally, it should be understood that explaining parental involvement is really an intermediate step toward developing a more comprehensive understanding of how school size affects academic achievement, the ultimate purpose for which schools exist.

Limitations

While the findings indicate evidence of school climate serving as a mediator of parents' communication and participation, several limitations exist within the study. These constraints include making use of secondary data sources, relying on a self-selected group of respondents, possible socially desirable responding, reliance on the subjective perceptions of the conditions in the schools rather than on objective measurements of them, and, perhaps most importantly, using correlational data to draw "causal" inferences. In addition, it should be understood that the units of analysis are schools, not the individual parents whose children attend these schools. That is to say, the analyses are analyses of the perceptions of these parents aggregated to the school level.

Mahoe (2004) describes some of the disadvantages of using secondary data. She cautions that one major disadvantage of using secondary data sets is a lack of access to the instruments used to originally collect data. Frequently, the researchers did not design these instruments, and their original intent may have been to achieve different goals (Cowton, 1998; Mahoe, 2004). In addition, Dunismuir and Williams (1990) suggested that the biases and potential inaccuracies are impossible to check. A question of note in the literature arises around whether or not data can be separated from the mechanisms of data collection and the context in which the data were collected (Cowton, 1998; Dunsmuir & Williams, 1990).

The survey data that the authors utilized comprises the responses of over 1.5 million parents and students. It is likely that several groups of parents are either underrepresented or not reflected at all in the results. For example, a parent experiencing disenfranchisement with the school system or conflicts with their child's school will likely not have completed a survey on behalf of the Department of Education. Similarly, parents who are new to the country or for whom English is not their primary language may not have participated in the survey due to perceived cultural biases or inhibitors. Even among those schools whose parents did elect to participate in the survey, 30% were excluded from the

study sample because their response rates were below 30%. However, it should be noted that the discrepancies between the study sample and the population of schools is fairly minimal, at least with regard to the variables available for inclusion in this comparison.

In addition, the possibility of socially desirable responding should be acknowledged to the extent that parents are "invested" in seeing their children's schools as more than adequate for the purpose of educating them. In a related vein, the study relies upon the parents' subjective perceptions of the availability of opportunities for communication and participation, whether or not they are affected by socially desirable responding. These should not be confused with or for objective measurements of these same opportunities. Still, it may well be the case that the parents' subjective perceptions of opportunities for communication and participation are no less relevant or "real," at least to them, than objective measurements of these same phenomena.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the correlational, cross-sectional design of the Department of Education's Learning Environment Surveys limit the explanatory power of the findings reported herein. It should be clearly understood that observational studies do not and cannot provide a rigorous evaluation of causal claims. Only a true experimental design can provide the imprimatur for such claims.

Areas of Future Inquiry

One of the claims of the small schools movement is that small school environments lead to increased academic achievement outcomes, a more positive school climate, and decreased incidents of suspension and expulsion. Further testing of the models described in this paper will include the addition of academic achievement indicators such as attendance rates, standardized test performance including middle grade state exams and high school level Regents exams, as well as suspension rates. If the small school proponents are to be believed, then we would expect to see the positive indirect effect of school climate on academic achievement indicators.

Also bearing investigation are the individual demographic factors that may impact how parents, guardians, and students experience school climate, engagement, and communication. Many scholars have documented the achievement gap that exists between children of color and White youth. Latino and African American children are far more likely to experience school failure than are White children. Analysis of desegregated data of the National Assessment of Educational Performance (Campbell, Reese, O'Sullivan, & Dossey, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lubienski, 2002) illustrate the large gap between the

performance of White children and their Latino and African American counterparts (Campbell et al., 1996). There is a strong possibility that families with children of color may experience home–school communication, school climate, and opportunities for participation differently than White families.

Conclusion

School reform movements in major urban areas nationwide have invested millions of dollars to try and implement new policies, create new schools, and reconfigure existing schools in the service of increasing the academic achievement of young people. One essential element that has been found to enhance academic performance is parent involvement. This study's models suggest that school climate and the dimensions of perceived safety and respect are important conditions for parents to actualize their invitations to participate in the school community and to maximize communication opportunities. With a national wave of policymaking focusing on the creation of and benefits imparted by smaller schools, it is more important than ever to understand the impacts of enrollment on a school's climate and culture and how those create more engaging environments for students and their families. While brick and mortar issues such as the sizes and shapes of existing structures may lend themselves to creative rearrangements, small schools, academies, and houses within larger schools and other configurations of learning environments have become a fixed part of the public education landscape. Policymakers and practitioners must partner with researchers to understand the impacts of these new learning environments on students' academic performance and on family engagement. This article is a beginning attempt to understand the role of school size, school climate, and parents perceptions of invitations to participate in their children's education.

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Book Review: Innovative Voices in Education

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With the pervasive nature of ethnic and linguistic diversity in public education today, the almost cliché maxim reminding all involved in the field of education that "it takes a village to raise a child" is more relevant than ever before. In a book patterned after the need for collaborative relationships to improve education, editor Eileen Gale Kugler brings together 19 creative perspectives on diversity in *Innovative Voices in Education: Engaging Diverse Communities* (2012).

Recent demographic shifts in the United States support the need for the discussion of diversity espoused by this book. According to 2010 U.S. Census data, the number of people identifying themselves as non-White minorities increased from 86.9 million to 111.9 million, a growth of 29% in just a 10-year span of time. This accounts for a third of the total population of the country. In the Western part of the United States, this diversity is even greater, as 47% of the population identified themselves as non-White. Census data also predicts that the Latino and Asian populations will triple in the United States by the year 2050. As student populations across the U.S. and also in many other countries around the globe increase in diversity, there is a greater need for all those involved with the education of these students to increase in both knowledge and understanding of how to best engage these diverse communities. The stories in this book, told by the innovators themselves, help reach Kugler's goal of "bringing innovations in diversity out into the open" (p. xvi) to inspire anyone who has a stake in the field of education, including educators, administrators, parents, and community members. This book review will briefly

overview the value of each of the five parts into which the book is divided, as well as suggesting some applications for this book within the field and detailing the book's major strengths and weaknesses.

Kugler has organized the 19 chapters in *Innovative Voices in Education* into five different topical parts. The first part is entitled "Building Respectful Schools" and serves as a good introduction to the rest of the book because it contains items of value for all stakeholders in the field of education. In the first chapter, Howie Schaffer, vice president at Cook Ross, Inc., speaks to the significance of a book like this. In a clear and cogent commentary, Schaffer says, "It is clear that we need to muster the courage to both explore and repudiate our collective willingness to relegate our most vulnerable children to an educational system that too often does not recognize nor value our unique strengths" (p. 5). Too long, Schaffer implies, have we been unwilling to examine ourselves and how we may be contributing to the ongoing system of injustice and lack of respect for diversity in our schools. The rest of this part of the book continues with a firsthand account of public schooling in the U.S. from two immigrant students (Chapter 2), which is a perspective too often missed by those in the field. Kugler herself finishes this first part with Chapter 3, which deals with the importance of valuing individual students by understanding our own assumptions and expectations.

Part 2 of *Innovative Voices in Education* is entitled "The Personal Power of a Teacher." This section is of particular value to education practitioners, as it contains both inspiring stories and some practical resources. The authors in this section write of the importance of student storytelling (Chapter 5) and bilingual education (Chapter 6) as means through which teachers can value diversity while also increasing student language acquisition. Of particular value to teachers is Chapter 7, "Addressing Silences," which gives practical suggestions for how to talk about difficult issues of diversity, race, sexual orientation, and religion with students of all ages. Sara Kugler, the chapter's author, discusses first helping students to understand their own beliefs and prejudices, exposing them to plenty of resources expressing diverse perspectives, and then allowing them to reconstruct their own new beliefs about these controversial and difficult issues. This section of the book also opens and closes with two chapters about specific stories of diversity and how innovative teachers are overcoming obstacles. Chapter 4 discusses the unprecedented Indian Education for All Act in Montana, which requires teachers across all content areas to incorporate Native American Studies into the curriculum. While at first glance not specifically applicable to all educators, the respect for Native American culture and concerns about presenting cultural history in a respectful and thorough manner is a valuable model for any teacher dealing with issues of diversity

in the classroom. Chapter 8, the final chapter of this section, discusses a successful charter school system in Texas (YES Prep) and how spectacular teachers are making the difference there.

Part 3 of the book is entitled "Courageous Leaders" and contains chapters written by principals and administrators facing issues of diversity in their schools. They discuss issues such as leading for equity (Chapter 9), helping to build student–parent–teacher relationships (Chapter 10), and empowering teachers for collaboration and problem-solving (Chapter 11). In addition to providing some powerful suggestions for school administrators, this section also provides some theoretical perspectives on leadership and how to use administrative power to the advantage of the culturally disadvantaged.

Part 4, "The Village It Takes," is focused on engaging parents and community members in schools as a means to further diversity. Chapter 12, written by Young-chan Han, discusses four stages of immigrant parent involvement, meant to differentiate between the needs of parents at all four levels. These stages provide a valuable framework both for understanding the needs and concerns of immigrant parents as they develop and deepen in their school involvement and for how best to engage them at each developmental level. Such a framework has value for teachers, school administrators, and community members as they seek to understand that all immigrant parents are not the same. The other two chapters in this section discuss utilizing community resources to ready children to enter preschool (Chapter 13) and how schools are providing resources for parents, thereby giving them the power and education necessary to help their children succeed in school (Chapter 14).

The final part of this book is entitled "Global Perspectives" and contains three chapters, each written by authors who have experienced diversity and come up with innovative solutions for valuing that diversity in their own communities in different corners of the world. Chapter 15, written by Amineh Ahmed Hoti, provides a review of the necessity of diversity as a path to compassion, understanding, and love in a post-9/11 world. Hoti has helped create a curriculum resource for teachers known as "Valuing Diversity" and explains its successes as it is currently being used in the United Kingdom. The final two chapters of this section are written by teachers who have experienced diversity in the classroom in Australia and Canada, respectively.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 17, serves to bring the entire book full circle as author Sean Grainger discusses the importance of respect, understanding, relationships, and responsibility in what he calls the Hope Wheel of respecting diversity. Diversity, he says, must be more than a one-shot deal or a yearly "cultural festival." Rather, in order to make a lasting impression, diversity must permeate every aspect of the public school, thereby allowing culture to become the school culture.

This book has value and possible applications for a variety of stakeholders in the field of education. With the shifts in population and demographics in the United States (and, in fact, in many countries), almost all educators are in classrooms with diverse students and will find both inspiring stories from their colleagues as well as some practical resources for engaging their own students in this book. Part three may be of particular use to administrators and school district personnel in order to initiate school leadership that values diversity from the top down. Education researchers will also find many fascinating stories of innovation in this book that may provide avenues for further research and resources for further inquiry. Individual chapters in this book would even be of value to teaching programs throughout the country dealing with specific issues of diversity. However, the true value of this book lies in taking all five sections together and reading the book as a whole, to enhance the realization that engaging diverse communities involves the much-needed perspectives of all five parts.

In order to better understand the value and applications of this book, it is important first to consider some of its key weaknesses and strengths. The weaknesses of this book are few, but important to review regardless. Although the book is divided into five parts, some of the differentiation is slightly unclear between parts. Certain chapters, such as Chapter 8 on the YES Prep Schools, and Chapter 15 on the "Valuing Diversity" curriculum, could have fit easily into multiple categories. An introduction to each individual part might have been helpful in understanding the divisions. Additionally, as with any book containing chapters from multiple contributing authors, some authors write with more readability than others, and there is a variance between the amount of autobiographical storytelling and theoretical concepts between chapters. Finally, likely because this is a first edition, there are some minor editing issues in the book.

Despite some small flaws, the strengths of this book far outweigh the weaknesses. As previously mentioned, this book contains a wide array of perspectives, furthering the point that many different groups must work together to engage diverse communities in the field of education. The chapters contain some very practical information, although not without theoretical bases. The theme of a need for humility in educators, administrators, and schools as an important facet of valuing diversity is reinforced throughout, which is important for all education stakeholders to remember as they deal with these issues. Overall, the stories of the educators, administrators, students, parents, and community members in the book are inspiring, reminding the reader that everyone can make a difference, even on a small scale. Kugler's presentation—bringing stories of innovation in diversity out into the open—rather than furthering the

image of despair that we so often associate with our broken education system, paints a picture of hope for the future of public education brought about by individuals willing to engage in innovations for diversity and equity.

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